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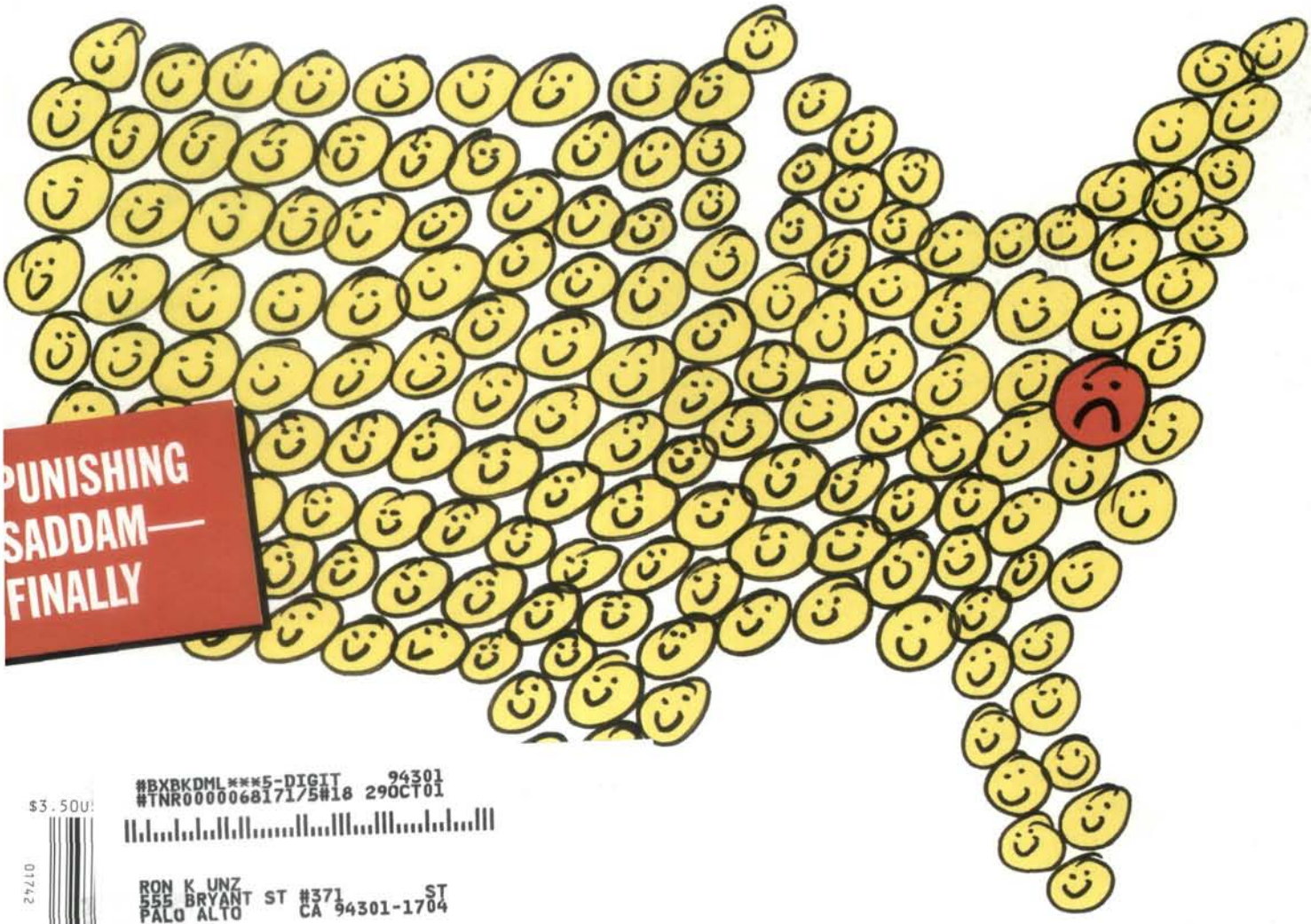

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A Weekly Journal of Opinion

JANUARY 4 & 11, 1999

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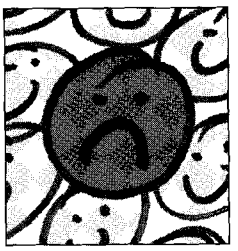

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CORRESPONDENCE

Impeachable argument

To the editors:

Jeffrey Rosen goes to great pains to demonstrate why my position that the option before Congress is impeachment or nothing overstates the case against censure ("Shameless," November 30). But he largely ignores the foundation of my position: the doctrine of separated powers.

The Founders understood that there would be a constant political temptation on the part of the legislature to draw all power into its "impetuous vortex," and so they sought to bolster the weaker of the institutions by protecting them from the natural impulses of the legislative branch. They allowed Congress only one way to scale the wall of separation between it and the presidency: impeachment. And they rendered the process politically difficult enough that it would not be used for light and transient reasons. The fact that we are now embarking on only the third impeachment inquiry in our history attests to the success of their scheme.

GARY L. MCDOWELL
London, England

To the editors:

Jeffrey Rosen's argument for a congressional bill of censure framed on a contractual model of a conditional amnesty rather than a punitive model of acquiescence to a lesser punishment is provocative. But I have two observations.

First, Rosen casts conditional amnesty as a plea bargain rather than as a bill of attainder. But, while a plea bargain certainly has a contractual form, it just as plausibly fits the punitive model insofar as it is precisely an agreement to a lesser punishment based on fear of risking a greater punishment.

Second, Rosen claims that, since most Democrats do not believe that Clinton's behavior rises to the level of an impeachable offense, even a censure bill framed as a conditional amnesty poses the problem that "the only representatives and senators who could vote for the bill in good faith would be those who believe that Clinton has, in fact, committed impeachable offenses." On the contrary, it is precisely *because* most congressional Democrats (and many Republicans) do not see the president's conduct, while reprehensible, as constituting impeachable offenses that they could conscientiously vote for censure as the more fitting sanction.

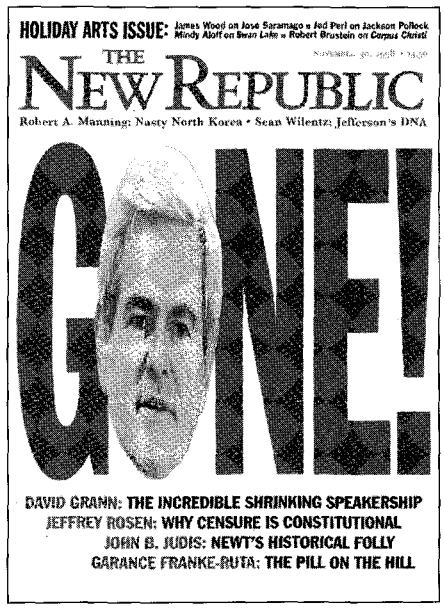
MARTIN CARCIERI
Jacksonville Beach, Florida

Founding father

To the editors:

I'm glad that Sean Wilentz felt personally gratified by the recent revelations showing that Thomas Jefferson fathered at least one child by Sally Hemings ("Hemings Hawing," November 30). I suppose I should also feel gratified that Wilentz dispensed his personal version of absolution upon me, dismissing the bizarre claim of several conservative pundits that I somehow orchestrated the release of the DNA evidence to influence the Clinton impeachment hearings.

But Wilentz's take on what he calls "the Jefferson-Hemings romance" strikes me as fairy-tale stuff of the sappiest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sort. There is no evidence whatsoever that the Jefferson-Hemings liaison was a romance. Spinning the story that way plays to the popular craving for a miniseries version of history and transforms Jefferson from a white supremacist into a multicultural hero, a rather huge stretch that sets new standards for wish fulfillment and for history-as-therapy.

JOSEPH J. ELLIS
Amherst, Massachusetts

To the editors:

Rather than crow about "proof" that Jefferson had sex with Sally Hemings, Sean Wilentz should understand that the distinctive Jeffersonian chromosome is just another piece in a far-from-complete puzzle. Even the scientist who tracked the chromosome has said his work proves nothing. Actually, it raises new questions.

It now seems that Sally's eldest son, Tom, was not Jefferson's, which is odd since Tom Hemings's resemblance to Jefferson sparked the controversy. Based on the chromosomal evidence, presidential paternity is more likely in the case of Eston Hemings, Sally's youngest son, born six years after the assault on Jefferson. But that would suggest that Jefferson was reckless enough with his reputation to continue an illicit liaison surrounded by witnesses after having been previously exposed.

JOHN E. BURKE
Ardsley, New York

Denial mentality

To the editors:

In the past two years, THE NEW REPUBLIC has published at least four dozen articles on anti-Semitism. In the past three months alone, the magazine has published two articles that discussed Holocaust denial (August 10 and October 5). Just a few weeks later, your editor-in-chief, Martin Peretz, engaged in a similar denial of the violence and harassment experienced by the American Muslim community following the Oklahoma City bombing ("Siege Mentality," November 30). He dismissed it as "legends and lies" and "a gross, unbelievably gross, exaggeration."

Peretz obviously never examined the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) report discussing the immediate anti-Muslim backlash after the Oklahoma City bombing. Our online search shows that THE NEW REPUBLIC has never investigated anti-Muslim bias in America.

Anti-Muslim acts discussed in CAIR's publication were carefully examined, leading to the exclusion of incident reports with vague and/or inconsistent data. Some of the incidents included in CAIR's report appeared first in newspapers around the country. For example, the tragedy of Sahar Al-Muwsawi, who miscarried her near-term baby after assailants attacked her Oklahoma home, appeared first in the *Daily Oklahoman* on April 25, 1995. The evidence gathered to document this and other incidents includes police reports, medical records, and tapes. The facts suggest a correlation between anti-Muslim attacks and the unfounded media speculation.

CAIR's report has won recognition not only in the media but also in academia and the civil rights community. Readers of THE NEW REPUBLIC can obtain the report to judge its validity for themselves.

MOHAMED NIMER
Research Director, CAIR
Washington, D.C.

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Martin Peretz replies:
It's offensive and absurd to compare questioning CAIR with Holocaust denial. I stand by my skeptical assessment of its reports. CAIR claimed that 222 anti-Muslim incidents occurred after the Oklahoma City bombing, but its report specifically cited only 71. Regarding the alleged miscarriage, CAIR reported that the windows of the woman's home were shattered and that "unknown assailants also pounded on the woman's door screaming anti-Islamic epithets." But the Oklahoma City police report, based on an interview with the family, distinctly noted that there was no broken glass—the window was plastic and did not break—and made no mention of any pounding on the door or any anti-Islamic screaming.

Good ban

To the editors:
Gregg Easterbrook argues against the ban on U.S. funding of the United Nations Population Fund by claiming that assisting the Chinese population-control program has a restraining influence ("Inconceivable," November 23). Throughout its 17-year relationship with the China program, however, UNFPA has not just failed (as Easterbrook concedes) to "aggressively denounce" coercion in the program but has actively denied that the program is coercive at all.

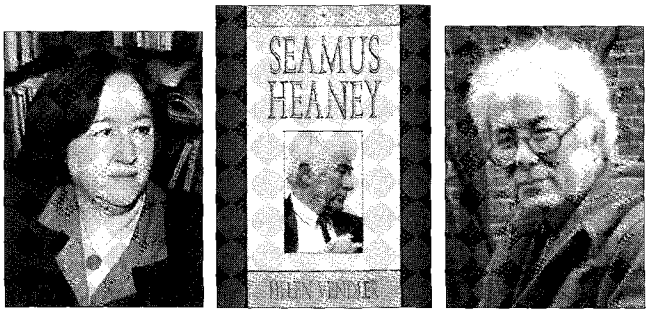
UNFPA Executive Director Nafis Sadik claimed in 1989 that "the implementation . . . and the acceptance of [the] policy is purely voluntary. There is no such thing as, you know, a license to have a birth and so on." In a 1991 interview with the Chinese government news agency Xinhua, Sadik went even further. "China has every reason to feel proud of and pleased with its remarkable achievements made in its family planning policy," the agency reported her saying. "The country could offer its experiences and special experts to help other countries."

A senior UNFPA official now asserts that "China is keen" to implement a birth control program "based on the principles of free and voluntary choice." But this is contradicted by evidence of continued repression—including a smuggled videotape of a family-planning center with a built-in jail cell—which is hard to reconcile with UNFPA's view that past coercion consisted of "excesses" by "overzealous local officials."

By operating for 20 years not only as a major donor to the Chinese program but also as its principal cheerleader, UNFPA has failed to be "part of the solution."

CHRIS SMITH
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.

SEAMUS HEANEY
• helen vendler •



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FROM WASHINGTON

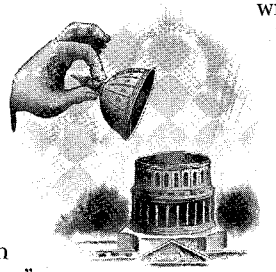
Aid and comfort

I know President Clinton lied under oath about his affair with Monica Lewinsky. I know he's also lied about all sorts of other matters, public and private, weighty and not so weighty. But I still believe that the looming threat of impeachment had nothing to do with his decision to strike Iraq immediately after learning that Saddam Hussein had once again illegally refused to cooperate with United Nations weapons inspectors. Indeed, I find it no more difficult to believe that he made this call on the merits than to believe that all those House Republican moderates are voting for impeachment because that's what their consciences dictate. Come to think of it, given the moderates' obvious fear of the party's right wing, personified by House Majority Whip Tom "the Hammer" DeLay, I find the president's story somewhat more credible than these GOP wets' protestations of moral agony.

It doesn't even matter much to me whether or not Clinton acted out of narrow political motives. Iraq has been delinquent on its disarmament commitments for months; Saddam's military and security apparatus is long overdue for a crippling air strike; this action was both utterly justified by Saddam's past behavior and clearly in the American interest. If the impeachment crisis encouraged the president to hasten the attack in any way, then well and good. Actually, Clinton displayed a kind of courage in ordering this action knowing others would question his motives. History will absolve him.

But what will history make of Senator Trent Lott, who, upon being paid the constitutional courtesy of being informed by the president that the strikes had been ordered, went public with his view that he could not support the action "at this time"? Thus did the Senate majority leader fall in line with DeLay and House Rules Committee Chairman Gerald Solomon; both these two had remarked earlier that both the current confrontation with Iraq and all previous ones had been manufactured by the White House to divert attention from the scandal.

The president's credibility problems at home may or may not undermine the perceived legitimacy of his actions abroad. But these extraordinarily partisan Republican remarks *definitely* undermine the actual legitimacy of their party's impeachment crusade. Enemies of the United States, take note. It is now the position of the Republican leadership that partisanship continues well beyond the water's edge; the quest for the truth about Monica's hat pin shall take precedence over any vital American interest, even one as fateful as the struggle to rid the Middle East of Saddam's biological, chemical, and nuclear menace.



Did Bill Clinton commit "treason, bribery, or other high crimes and misdemeanors"? In due course, the Senate may get its chance to hold a trial on that question. But, no matter how much Lott and other Republicans carry on about "supporting our troops," it is already clear that the majority leader of that same body has just handed Saddam Hussein a propaganda windfall, which is to say he has committed a rhetorical betrayal of his country. And this is the same politician who once said that congressional criticism of then-President Bush's plans for war in the Gulf "could be giving aid and comfort to Iraq."

Until this point, the Republicans have occupied the moral high ground in the scandal, if only in the sense that opponents of impeaching the president have been forced to argue that what he did was reprehensible, but not *that* reprehensible. The pro-impeachment position, by contrast, enjoyed the advantage of consistency: the law is the law; the truth is the truth; no exceptions.

With the Republican leadership's verbal attacks on the Iraq strike, however, that position of moral consistency begins to look more and more like a species of moral zealotry. And, more and more, the tectonic shifts in American life that have elevated this attitude to dominance within one of the country's two major political parties are becoming visible. Some of these shifts were brilliantly delineated by a December 16, 1998, article in *The Wall Street Journal* by Jackie Calmes: declining voter turnout has reduced congressional elections to contests between the parties' most ideological constituents; that tendency has been exaggerated by the scientific gerrymandering of districts; both parties have become inhospitable to moderates. The rise of the Christian right is largely a reaction to the social and cultural turbulence that began in the '60s and the attendant need for moral certainty that many Americans have understandably felt. To such people, Bill Clinton represents the wrong side in our ongoing culture wars—he, his dissolute behavior, and his weasel words about it are the very embodiment of "I'm O.K., you're O.K." moral relativism.

To be sure, the Christian right's assessment of Clinton and the social trends he represents is not altogether inaccurate. Perhaps the only thing more offensive than Clinton's behavior is the argument that there was nothing wrong with it. (I'm thinking here of the noted political theorist Alec Baldwin, who recently observed on TV that, in another, more sophisticated country, the people would stone Henry Hyde to death.) But of course moral absolutism is not a practical alternative to moral relativism. All moral absolutists must be hypocrites. There is always an absolute rule they are willing to bend when that suits another one of their lofty objectives. Hence Henry Hyde's remarks during the Iran-Contra affair that Oliver North's lies, sworn and otherwise, were justified by the greater good of defeating communism. Hence, too, Hyde's view, expressed apropos the April trial of a fellow anti-abortion crusader who was accused of illegally blockading abortion clinics, that "one has an obligation to oppose unjust laws."

Obviously, Hyde has a point; the civil rights movement was right to stage peaceful disobedience of the South's ugly laws. And, lest I be misunderstood, under no circumstances can Slick Willie's self-serving evasions qualify as any kind of moral statement. But what gives Henry Hyde the right to pick and choose which causes qualify as legitimate reasons for civil disobedience and which ones don't? And how does he propose to prevent some well-intentioned soul from interpreting his dispensations as a license to commit, say, murder in defense of the unborn?

The real alternative to moral relativism is moral reasoning. This, too, requires confidence in one's own convictions—but tempered by humility and a willingness to accommodate others' valid ideas and interests. It requires, in short, qualities that appear to have deserted Trent Lott, Tom DeLay, and too many others in their party, just when the country needs them most.

CHARLES LANE

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THE NEW REPUBLIC

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WAG THE FOX

Fine, then. Wag the dog. And keep wagging it, until the real peril has passed. If it was the prospect of impeachment that emboldened President Clinton finally to make war against Saddam Hussein's ability to make war, then the prospect of impeachment will have been morally and strategically serendipitous. After all, there are fiends in the world more dangerous even than Tom DeLay.

The address in which the president explained the nature and the justification of the attack on what he called "military and security targets" in Iraq—the assault has commenced just as we go to press, and it seems designed to continue for at least a few days—was so clear and unmisleading that it almost made you melancholy about the presidency that might have been. An un-Clintonian Clinton got it exactly right. It is a little embittering to observe that everything that the president said on the evening of December 16 about Saddam Hussein and his arsenal of extermination could have been said with as much truth and as much confidence a month earlier, and last spring, and last winter, and in the many frustrating years of the Iraqi defiance of UNSCOM.

In November, he said, he decided to "give Saddam one last chance," but now Saddam "has failed to seize the chance." This narrative is disingenuous: Saddam's strategy has not changed a whit since the conclusion of the cease-fire at the end of Operation Desert Storm. He never, not for a moment, intended to honor the agreement in the desert and surrender his chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons and facilities. Instead he set out to madden and to exhaust the West with impediments to the internationally mandated inspections, and to have his avaricious representatives in the so-called international community, France and Russia, do what they could to relieve Iraq of the sanctions.

Still, the president ably presented the causes of and reasons for the American and British action. The proximate cause—listen closely, Lott and Livingston—was Richard Butler's latest rattling report to the secretary general of the United Nations. The unshakeable Butler recounted old and new obstacles that Baghdad had placed in the way of UNSCOM's sleuths, and dourly concluded that "in the light of this experience, that is, in the absence of full cooperation by Iraq, it must regrettably be recorded that the commission is not able to conduct the substantive work mandated to it by the Security Council."

But this frustration has a history. And its history begins before the Gulf war and its aftermath. It begins with the fact that the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction is different in kind from the threat posed by any other weapons of mass destruction anywhere else in the world, because *he has already used them.* In the case of this particular killer, it is way too late for deterrence theory. The proper response to Iraq's arsenal is to dismantle it, peacefully or unpeacefully.

This is what the president seems finally to have understood. His catalog of Saddam's chemical aggressions should have been enough to remind every American who has not lost his or her mind to the impeachment passion that the rationale for these strikes is not political; it is moral and strategic. It was encouraging also to hear the president pronounce that "the hard fact is that, so long as Saddam remains in power, he threatens the well-being of his people, the people of his region, the security of the world. The best way to end that threat once and for all is with a new Iraqi government.... We will strengthen our engagement with the full range of Iraqi opposition forces and work with them effectively and prudently." This is not an objective that can be accomplished quickly; and the United States, indeed the Clinton administration, has betrayed the Iraqi opposition in the past. But it is the proper objective, and it must become an overt and covert policy supported by more than one party and more than one administration.

There is something extraordinary about the spectacle of an enfeebled president leading where only a president can lead. If Operation Desert Fox is a measure of the weakness of a presidency, it is also a measure of the strength of a country. (This is what the Senate majority leader does not appear to understand.) In the middle of the greatest political excruciation in its modern history, the United States is doing the noble and necessary thing beyond its borders. We have set aside scandal for history. Soon we will pick up our scandal again, of course; but in this pause we will have soberly damaged the power of evil. We are more than our tabloids. •

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NOTEBOOK

HAPPY HOLIDAYS, SADDAM: In an otherwise cogent defense of the military strike against Iraq, and its timing, President Clinton blundered only once. He said that he had hastened to bomb because "the Muslim holy month of Ramadan begins this weekend. For us to initiate military action during Ramadan would be profoundly offensive to the Muslim world and, therefore, would damage our relations with Arab countries." The same canard about Ramadan was trotted out toward the end of the Gulf war—until it was discovered that Arab Muslims themselves had attacked one another during various Ramadans throughout history. More to the point, does anyone seriously believe that those in the Arab world likely to condemn these air strikes will not do so because America bombs Iraq a couple of days before Ramadan starts rather than a day after it begins? In such precincts, anti-Americanism knows no season.

EYELESS IN GAZA: So now we know what the circumstances are in which a man might be delighted to find himself in Gaza. It is certainly one of the sorriest, most compassion-forsaken places on earth; but for Bill Clinton, the muck in Gaza must have paled before the muck in Washington. On December 14, he became what he called "the first American president to address the Palestinian people in a city governed by Palestinians." The president's address was a peculiar mixture of politics and psychobabble. He honored the sorrows of the Palestinians, but he gave a rather abridged account of the origins of those sorrows. They have, he said, "a history of dispossession and dispersal"; but in truth they have a more complicated and more equivocal history. The traditional Palestinian response to their dispossession and their dispersal was political violence (internecine political violence, too) and the diabolization of Israelis, Zionists, and Jews. The unpleasant subject of terrorism was broached only as "our work against terrorism." The congratulations that he offered the Palestinian National Council on abrogating and annulling "fully, finally, and forever" the provisions of its charter calling for the destruction of Israel were weird congratulations: "You have sent ... a powerful message not to the government [of Israel] but to the people of Israel," as if the democratically elected government of Israel could somehow be overlooked or outplayed. The president rightly pointed out that the Palestinian discovery of diplomacy at Oslo and Washington and Wye has brought tangible and unprecedented benefits to them—"You have gained more in five years of peace than in forty-five years of war"—but he left his audience thinking that it deserved no share of the responsibility for the mean years that preceded the new peace process. Clinton said all the right things, too, about the need for "mutual recognition" and "mutual respect" and "legitimate rights for Palestinians [and] real security for Israel," and now and again he became appropriately hard-boiled, as when he exhorted his audience to cease "glorifying suicide bombers"; but he did not stay hard-boiled for long, and finally he delivered himself over to sentimentalities of a peculiarly American sort. He cited a governor of Arkansas who announced, in the aftermath of the Civil War, that "we have all done wrong," which is true but trivial, since every wrong is not like every other wrong. And he talked on and on about children, Palestinian children and Israeli children, rather in the way that he used to talk about Russian missiles being pointed, and then being no longer pointed, at American children. It is a common device of American politics that, when you want to dodge the hard stuff, repair to the children. And so he asked his interlocutors "to reach out to the people of Israel, to understand the pain of their children," and he exhorted both sides to "abandon the rhetoric of hate that still poisons public discourse and limits the vision of your children." This geo-infantilism led Clinton into a shocking equation of Israeli children "whose fathers had been killed in conflict with Palestinians" with Palestinian children "whose fathers are in Israeli prisons." Never mind that the former children would gladly change places with the latter children. A child is a child is a child; or as Clinton remarked about his meetings with the aforementioned groups of children, "If I had met them in reverse order, I would not have known which ones were Israeli and which Palestinian," which is precisely why the childish standpoint on political conflict is not terribly useful, except for the arousal of emotion. The president actually concluded by asking: "Will they feel your pain and will you understand theirs?" By this time he had moved himself deeply and had lost all grasp of the difference between an honest broker and a facilitator. He was a hero in Gaza. The Palestinians rose and applauded. Meanwhile the moderate Republicans did not.

THE TRUTH HURTS: It was only two years ago that Newt Gingrich was found guilty of 13 instances of misleading the House Ethics Committee. Gingrich had claimed that his college course was "completely nonpartisan" and "wholly independent of GOPAC," which ranks right up there on the whopper index with "I did not have sexual relations with that woman." Indeed, looking back, we're impressed with the isomorphism of the defenses offered on behalf of Gingrich then and Clinton now. Tom DeLay entered a plea of not guilty by reason of popularity and effectiveness: "Never has one man endured so many attacks, shown so much courage, and delivered so often for the American people." Then there was John Kasich, with what looks, in hindsight, like a prototype of Clinton's "no one ever gets prosecuted for civil perjury" line: "Newt did not lie.... He signed something he should have read more carefully. Every American has signed stuff they hadn't read very carefully." Gingrich himself blamed his lawyer for filing inaccurate disclosure forms. "I did not manage the effort intensely enough to thoroughly direct or review information being submitted to the committee on my behalf," he said. •

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GOP moderates' worst nightmare.

GOING TO EXTREMES

By David Grann

To understand why Republicans might actually impeach a president for only the second time in history, you need to fly more than 300 miles from Washington, D.C., to Big Flats, New York—not too far from the Canadian border—then rent a car and drive 20 minutes through cornfields and rolling hills until you come to a converted dairy barn called Love Church. The onetime warehouse is almost half a football field in length. Inside are rows of dining-table chairs that serve as pews and an overhead projector for flashing the words from the gospel. In its most recent literature, the church's senior pastor, Jim Pierce, warned, "Satan, knowing his time is short, is stepping up his efforts to destroy as much of humanity as he can."

Until recently, few people outside this largely rural community had heard of the fundamentalist church or its apocalyptic preacher. But, last week, they took their place among the little-known political forces driving the impeachment process. Less than 24 hours after Amo Houghton, a moderate Republican congressman from nearby Corning, declared that he would vote against impeaching the president, Pierce announced that he would challenge him in the next GOP primary. The news quickly reverberated through Capitol Hill, where it made an immediate—and lasting—impression on the 30 or so moderate Republicans pondering Bill Clinton's fate. The next day, Marge Roukema, a liberal New Jersey Republican who had barely survived a primary challenge from the religious right in the last election, came out for impeachment. So did Bob Franks, Rodney Frelinghuysen, and Frank LoBiondo of New Jersey, as well as Jack Metcalf of Washington and James Walsh of New York. Even one member who had promised to back the lesser punishment of censure—Jack Quinn of New York—announced he'd had a change of heart. "They're all caving," Houghton fretted.

Indeed, Jim Pierce, small-time preacher and fringe political activist, had suddenly made real for the entire GOP establishment what until then had been only a hypothetical threat—that Republicans who vote against impeachment can expect costly and damaging (if not dire) primary challenges from the right in 2000. "It's hard to imagine that one wing nut could turn enough votes to bring down the president of the United States," said one Democratic staffer, "but that's what's happening."

When I arrived at Pierce's home last Sunday afternoon he was sitting in his living room with his six kids, watching the Buffalo Bills game and eating ice cream. The place was an old farmhouse from the turn of the century, with red bricks and peeling wood floors, and through the window you could see the Love Church next door. "You finally made it," Pierce said.

The 41-year-old preacher was still in his black minister's clothing. He had round cheeks and a round stomach, and he sat with his legs slightly splayed, as if to give himself more room. The den was cluttered with Christmas ornaments and old furniture. I sat next to Pierce's wife on one of the worn couches covered with tapestries. "This gentleman came all the way from Washington to write about your dad," she told her kids.

I smiled, and Pierce handed me a resumé. "I thought this might help you," he said.

On the cover, it said in bold letters: JIM PIERCE U.S. CONGRESS and listed his accomplishments. Under political experience, it said: "Candidate." He told me what I had already discovered from an old news clipping. He had briefly challenged Houghton in the last GOP primary but was eventually removed from the ballot because of irregularities in his filing petition. ("Do you want the long or the short version?" he asked.) In the end, he ran on the Right to Life ticket, one of several anti-abortion candidates who were affiliated with Operation Rescue and came to be known as the Patrick Henry Men because they were willing to die for their cause.

Pierce garnered only seven percent of the vote in that election. But, as we got up and walked around the sprawling ministry, there were at least some signs that he was making inroads in this blue collar community. Next to the Love Church was another huge barn that had been converted into a radio station, where Pierce broadcasts his sermons, according to the sign out front, "FROM DAWN TO DUSK." The impeachment debate, Pierce said, had galvanized the growing number of religious conservatives across the district. "People out here are outraged" with Houghton's decision, he said, turning slightly red. "People have been calling his office all day to complain. The phone lines are so jammed you can't get through."

In fact, according to local news accounts, the congressman had received hundreds of letters, many calling him an "idiot" and a "traitor." Now Pierce said he was planning to launch his campaign tomorrow by staging a demonstration, at the crack of dawn, right in front of Houghton's office in downtown Corning. "I hope to send a message to any other moderate Republican who may be on the fence," he said. "You cannot vote against impeachment and not expect a primary" retribution.

A patrician with white hair and a wizened face, Amo Houghton personifies the GOP's moderate wing—or what's left of it. The 72-year-old former CEO of Corning Inc. and scion of one of the wealthiest families in America, he entered politics late in life out of a sense of noblesse oblige. His grandfather had been a congressman and his father ambassador to France and Germany. "He hasn't known the kind of life that a lot of people in this district know,"

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Pierce, whose father still works as a barber in Elmira, told me. "He lives in a kind of aristocratic bubble."

Like other moderates, Houghton believes in the minimum wage, the National Endowment for the Arts, and legalized abortion. A generation ago, the Houghtons of the world not only had a place in the Republican Party; they led it. Today, Houghton, increasingly squeezed out by the Jim Pierces of the world, fights his own party as much as the Democrats. "They're not Republicans; as a matter of fact, they're not even conservatives," Houghton once complained to *The Buffalo News*. "They're John Birchers or Lyndon LaRouchers or Randall Terryites."

The next day, I waited outside the hotel for a band of these new Republicans. When Pierce's van pulled up, it was so full of volunteers he asked me if I could drive my car. "There's no room," he said. I obliged and followed the van into nearby Corning, expecting to find a horde of little Pierces. Yet, when we got to the parking lot outside Houghton's office, it was empty. Including Pierce's daughter and me, there were just nine people. Pierce looked around with a half-smile and took out his speech and began to read to me: "If moderate Republicans are going to go against conservatives and the party, then they will face a serious challenge in 2000."

"That's right," said one of his supporters. "That's right."

Occasionally a car passed by and honked, and Pierce waved. (I couldn't tell if they were honking for him or against him.)

"We have just learned," he continued, "that Houghton has received a whopping twenty-nine score out of a hundred from the American Conservative Union."

"You tell it. That's right."

As Pierce finished his speech, Congressman Houghton unexpectedly showed up. He wore a wool scarf and green felt hat and topsiders. He started shaking all the protesters' hands, including Pierce's, which seemed to confuse them. "Delighted you could come," he said cheerfully. "Jim, you've got to do what you think is right—what you believe in."

Houghton said they were both opposed to Clinton's conduct. "My only point is that waving your hands doesn't mean anything gets done," he explained. "There are not enough votes in the Senate to remove" Clinton anyway.

A TV camera materialized, as if stumbling upon a roadside accident. As it bore in on them, Pierce took a step closer to Houghton. "I think it does," he said. "I think it sends a message to our kids."

Houghton cited some of the old dons of the party, the Doles and the Fords who still agreed with him. "Two-thirds of the American people want him to stay in office," he said.

"But they're not the people who elected you," Pierce snapped back.

After a while, the TV reporter interviewed Pierce, and I followed Houghton inside. "It's cold," he said, shaking as he unbuttoned his jacket. I asked him how he was, and he suddenly seemed much sadder than he had outside. "This thing is tearing the country apart," he said. "I didn't think it would be this bad. I've been working with my hands to build the Republican Party since 1948. I worked at the convention that supported Dewey...." He paused. "Unless the moderates stand up together, there won't be...." His voice trailed off. "I'm honored to serve my country. If this is the issue that throws me out of office, so be it."

But I could tell he wasn't really worried about his seat or Pierce or even Clinton. He was worried about his party and how it has surrendered to a relative handful of extremists. Houghton asked me about his colleagues: "They're all capitulating, aren't they?" I nodded, and, for a minute, he tried to perk up for me. He wished me a Merry Christmas, and I shook his hand and hurried to catch up with Pierce and his flock. But, when I walked outside, there was nobody there. •

Bob Barr's credibility gap.

CORNERED BARR

By Jason Zengerle

The House Judiciary Committee's approval of articles of impeachment against President Clinton should have been a moment of triumph for Bob Barr, the Republican congressman from Georgia. But *The Washington Post* spoiled the occasion for Barr, reporting that, last June, he addressed a meeting of a previously obscure white supremacist group, the Council of Conservative Citizens. On what should have been his day in the sun, Barr found himself facing an embarrassing little scandal of his own.

As we all know, the impeachment drama has nothing to do with the president's illicit sexual affair. The real issue is that, when confronted with questions about his wrongdoing, he lied to cover it up—it's about the character a politician exhibits when faced with the embarrassing truth about himself. Similarly, Barr has every right to maintain a consensual relationship with a repugnant collection of old-fashioned racists. But the Barr scandal isn't about racism, it's about truth. Has Barr been completely candid about his fling with the ultraright? Or does he, like the president, inhabit a "parallel universe ... when it comes to the use of the English language," as Barr so nicely put it during the impeachment hearings?

First, the background. On June 6, 1998, Barr traveled to Charleston, South Carolina, to give the keynote address at the semi-annual meeting of the Council of Conservative Citizens (or CofCC, as it calls itself). Though the

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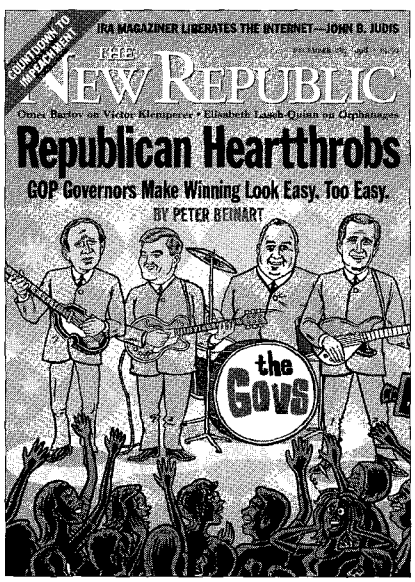
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CofCC professes to be a mainstream conservative organization, the *Citizens Informer,* the group's official newspaper, and its website betray its true agenda: the preservation of white Christian America amid an onslaught of immigration and race-mixing. One *Citizens Informer* columnist is Robert B. Patterson, the founder of the pro-segregation Mississippi Citizens' Council that sprang up during the civil rights era. He wrote in a recent issue: "Any effort to destroy the [white] race by a mixture of black blood is an effort to destroy western civilization itself." The CofCC's website features the animadversions of one H. Millard, who writes: "Genocide via the bedroom chamber is as long-lasting as genocide via war."

What did Barr know about this ideological tendency, and when did he know it? CofCC officials claim he was fully informed before his speech. "We don't invite people out of the dark who are not familiar with us, particularly a high-profile person," says Gordon Lee Baum, the CofCC's chief executive officer. "So copies of our newspaper were sent to him and our brochure. If he looked at it I presume he had knowledge of what it was about."

Barr told TNR that he never received the newspaper; he said he was sent only a couple of pieces of the group's literature, which "by all appearances, makes them out to be a very pristine, conservative, grassroots organization." This is an interesting assessment, since one brochure sent to Barr contained an endorsement of the group by Lester Maddox, the notoriously unrepentant segregationist who was governor of Barr's home state from 1967 to 1970.

Did Barr respond to questions about his appearance with immediate full disclosure? Barr was first confronted about the CofCC last summer, when Margaret Kempf, a suburban Washington woman who tracks right-wing groups as a hobby, spotted Barr's smiling visage in a *Citizens Informer* photo spread about the Charleston meeting. Kempf called Barr's office and said she wanted to ask about it. But, Kempf says, "they just put me on hold and then they told me to call the Georgia office. So I called the Georgia office, and they put me on hold for some time. And I couldn't stay on because it was long-distance." She later wrote a complaining letter to *The Washington Times*, which drew no reaction from Barr.

Then, on December 4, Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz, who tangled with Barr during a December 1 appearance before the Judiciary Committee, wrote a letter to Chairman Henry Hyde complaining about Barr's CofCC speech. Barr wrote back to Hyde, blasting Dershowitz's complaint as "completely unfounded."

To a reasonable person, those words could mean that Barr was denying that he even spoke at the CofCC gathering, since Barr's letter otherwise didn't specifically address the point. But apparently it depends on how you define "unfounded." Barr, it seems, meant that Dershowitz's suggestion that Barr himself was a racist and an anti-Semite was "unfounded." For, when Thomas Edsall of the *Post* got wind of the story, Barr's spokesman acknowledged that Barr had, indeed, attended the group's meeting.

Then Barr put out a press release blasting Dershowitz again and dismissing his dalliance with the CofCC as "a brief appearance." What does he mean by "brief"? Barr told TNR that he was at the conference for roughly 90 minutes. Asked if he considered an hour and a half in a busy congressman's day to be a brief period, Barr bristled. "Anybody can interpret that any way they want," he said. He then continued to minimize his appearance. "I got there a little bit early, I waited until it was time for my presentation, I gave the presentation, and I left right after," he explained.

CofCC members recall that Barr's visit lasted a bit longer than 90 minutes; they also dispute the notion that he left immediately after his speech. According to Tom Dover, the president of the CofCC (who also chauffeured the congressman from the meeting to the airport), Barr spent "the balance of the time" at the conference "visit[ing] with people" after giving his speech. "There were pictures taken," Dover recalls. "I was in one with him." Sure enough, a recent issue of *Citizens Informer* features two shots of a smiling Barr, one of which shows him embracing a CofCC member.

This last detail is important because, in a follow-up story Edsall wrote for the *Post*, Barr conceded that, while waiting at the conference to give his speech, he sat through a CofCC "youth panel" discussion that "gave me serious pause." But if Barr was upset, he kept it to himself. Samuel Francis, the former *Washington Times* columnist and CofCC board member who moderated the youth panel, recalled that Barr "came up and shook my hand after [the youth panel] and made positive comments about what I had said." When I asked Francis if Barr seemed ill at ease, he replied, "Absolutely not."

Dover also said the congressman didn't seem troubled. As for Barr, his memory on this point is spotty. He told TNR he could not recall exactly what gave him pause, beyond the fact that someone made "radical statements about race and immigration." Francis doesn't remember what was said. Michael Pucci, one of the four youth panel participants, recalled that two other panel members said things that "made me very uncomfortable," although, like Barr, he couldn't recall the offending words exactly. Baum refused to provide phone numbers for the other panel participants when I was unable to find them on my own.

Barr's press release said: "I strongly disagree with many of this group's ridiculous views, and have said so publicly." This phrasing clearly implies that Barr has, in the past, decried the group (although, given the context, "ridiculous" is a rather mild rebuke). But, when asked to point to previous statements of his disagreement with the CofCC, Barr explained that what he meant to say was that he had publicly repudiated the "views, not the group." One wonders, of course, why someone who had been as vocally opposed to racism and immigrant-bashing as Barr claims to have been would ever have been invited to speak by the CofCC in the first place. But Barr has an answer, of sorts, to that, too: "If you're inquir-

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ing whether I made any prior statements about this, no, because it never occurred to me." When I later asked Barr's spokesman, Brad Alexander, why Barr's press release made it sound like he had issued previous statements on the matter, he explained that Barr was alluding to comments he had made to the press earlier that day.

Barr isn't the only member of Congress with a CofCC problem. According to a number of CofCC members, including Dover, Mississippi Senator Trent Lott is a dues-paying member of the group, which is particularly strong in his home state. (Governor Kirk Fordice, for example, is an open and enthusiastic supporter of the group.) The *Citizens Informer* occasionally carries Lott's freely distributed newspaper column. Moreover, despite Lott's claim that he had "no firsthand knowledge" of the CofCC, Edsall reported on December 16 that Lott addressed the group in 1992, telling the audience members that they "stand for the right principles and the right philosophy."

When I asked Baum—who had just volunteered that Barr was *not* a CofCC member—whether Lott does, in fact, belong to the group, he said, "We don't deny or confirm whether anybody's a member. If Trent Lott says he's not a member, then put it to bed: he's not a member." When I noted that another CofCC member had told me that there is a record of Lott's membership at the group's headquarters in St. Louis, Baum replied, "There's no earthly way you could obtain that information if it were true." John Czwartacki, Lott's spokesman, says that Lott rejects the group's views and "does not consider himself a member."

Barr, too, has explicitly repudiated the CofCC—under questioning from TNR and others. "Yes, I do," he said. "I repudiate anybody that maintains racist views or anti-immigrant views." That seems categorical—unless it all depends on what the meaning of the word "racist" is. •

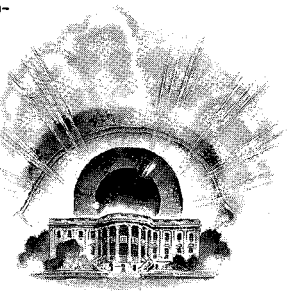
WHITE HOUSE WATCH

UNHAPPY HOLIDAYS

By Dana Milbank

Washington is feeling even more self-important than usual these days. Those of us who do not suppose we are making History are convinced we are watching History in the making. At every turn, History is stalking us: "History will track you down and condemn you for your cravenness," Princeton historian (and TNR contributing editor) Sean Wilentz told the Judiciary Committee Republicans. History is being coy: "It may be decades before History reveals the vastness of [Clinton's] abuse of power," ventured Republican Bob Barr, the honorable gentleman from the State of Insanity. History is frightening us, too: "Let History treat me kindly," Maxine Waters pleaded after voting against impeachment. And History seems to have impressive patience. Declared Democrat Martin Meehan to his fellow Judiciary Committee members: "History will not tune us out." Alas.

But I see a small flaw in the Washington soothsayers' rendezvous with destiny. History, as we all know, is written by the winners. And everybody involved in this Bimbroglio nightmare is most certainly coming out a loser. First, the legacy-conscious Clinton humiliated himself by his own conduct. Then, Ken Starr discredited himself with scurrilous prosecutorial tactics. Now, it is the Republicans who seem determined to disgrace themselves. Their mad rush to make their mark on history—regardless of the consequences—is causing Republicans to behave in erratic fashion. Henry Hyde, the once-admired Judiciary chairman who promised bipartisanship, appears to have succumbed to megalomania after ramming through four impeachment articles without a single Democratic vote. So what if the American people object? "If Jesus Christ had taken a poll, he would never have preached the gospel," Hyde said on national television. Thus did the chairman take his rightful place beside the Father and the Son.



Pulling Hyde's strings is House Majority Whip Tom DeLay, the ultraconservative former exterminator known as "the Hammer," who demonstrated his impartiality by declaring in March that Clinton has "no shame, no integrity, no dignity," and that, if a president "has cheated on his wife, he will cheat on the American people." Then there is Judiciary Committee zealot Bob Barr, who says people in the "real America" favor impeachment. It's not clear who he means, but we have some clues. Here's what the twice-divorced Georgian had to say on the House floor about gay marriage: "The flames of hedonism, the flames of narcissism, the flames of self-centered morality are licking at the very foundations of our society."

Cheering these guys on are groups such as the Family Research Council and the Christian Coalition, which sent a quarter-million petitions to Congress urging Clinton's removal. The only thing scarier would be if the military were involved. Oh, wait—it is! Remember the panel of retired admirals and generals the GOP brought in to condemn the president? Put it all together, and the post-Newt GOP seems determined to reinvent itself as a kind of American Taliban. No wonder David Schippers, the Judiciary Republicans' attack dog, urged members not to pay any attention to "a lousy election," as *The Washington Post* reported. I'm sure "real America" approves of this turn toward military theocracy. Me, I'm moving to Idaho and stockpiling some of those assault weapons the GOP has been trying to legalize.

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The rise of the Republican Taliban would normally be good news for the White House, which—with Newt gone and Starr fading—desperately needs such villains to launch a recovery. But, while the White House is no doubt grateful for these new nemeses, they are of little use at this particular moment. Impeachment, after all, is a humbling event—historic, even. As the House prepared for the vote, White House aides were at once dispirited and frenzied, but with no clear battle plan. The crisis really was, for once, out of their hands, and yet they felt they should do something. Press Secretary Joe Lockhart was a blur of nervous energy, thrice postponing a meeting with me. Legislative Director Larry Stein put off a lunch we'd scheduled, as did Paul Begala. When I complained to his assistant, Begala called back, apologetically. "Sorry, man, I'm trying to save the president of the United States from impeachment," he explained. Put that way, I suppose, it seemed reasonable that lunch could wait.

By last Monday, gloom had set in. Aides came to see impeachment as inevitable. A turning point came when Chris Shays, one of the few Republicans to oppose impeachment, began to waver, thus removing the cover for other Republicans who wanted to reject impeachment. At the same time, Jay Dickey, an Arkansas Republican the White House was counting on because of home-state support for Clinton, began to make ominous noises. Like everybody else, Clinton aides had assumed the Republicans would heed the electorate's message from November and call off the vote. But "with each passing day the outlook is bleaker," said one Clinton official. "There's not a soul here putting much faith in the institutional wisdom of Congress."

As the vote neared, even the famed White House message machine was failing. "Our spin is cautious optimism," said one Clinton adviser. "My own personal view? I don't see it." The real battle now, assuming impeachment clears the House, will be the political blame game. Does Clinton, by refusing to resign, get blamed for dragging out the proceedings? Or does the GOP get blamed for forcing an impeachment vote a majority didn't want? Though a vast majority of Americans oppose impeachment, 58 percent said in a *Washington Post*-ABC News poll released Monday that Clinton should resign if impeached rather than fight removal. White House aides were spooked when they heard that, and now they think the polls could break either way. "It's hard to care," said one weary aide. "I'm just so burned out at this point."

Those with the will to fight on are concentrating their efforts on ways to circumvent a trial. If, as seems likely, Democrats' procedural tactics fail in the House, the Senate's 45 Democrats can stop a trial at any stage by getting five Republicans to join them in voting to acquit. Unfortunately, this isn't terribly likely, and the White House is, for the first time, on totally unfamiliar terrain.

But, even with the administration seemingly more vulnerable than ever, there's no joy in Mudslingingville. The Republican members and Hill staffers with whom I spoke all but acknowledged that they were digging their own political graves by rushing to impeach a highly popular president—and by disregarding the will of the voters, expressed just last month. They also realize that the antics of the ultras make the party look like a gang of puritanical vigilantes. Perhaps that's why the Republican governors—practically the only popular (and reasonable) Republicans left—have been trying to pull the GOP back from the impeachment brink. New York Governor George Pataki has openly opposed impeachment, while many others have pleaded with congressional Republicans to wrap up the proceedings.

It's no coincidence that the governors, the party's only plausible presidential candidates, are distancing themselves from the Jihad Republicans in Congress. Gore and his staff won't acknowledge it, of course, but an impeachment vote against the president could be a huge advantage to the veep's 2000 campaign (even if Gore doesn't reap the ultimate benefit of accidental incumbency). Now, even if Gore's greatest fear, an economic downturn, comes to pass, it can plausibly be blamed on the Republicans for jolting the nation's confidence. And Gore could also reasonably tar even a relative moderate like George W. Bush with the DeLay-Barr-Hyde brush. Bush, or some other nominee, may want nothing to do with his party's Taliban wing, but he won't be able to escape them.

Some Republican strategists calculate that the voters will forget this impeachment coup by the next election. I suspect another dynamic is at work in the House GOP. Their policy agenda is in tatters, either stolen or defeated by Clinton, and they worry about fading away without a trace. By tarnishing Clinton's popular presidency for the history books, the Republicans have decided they'd rather be notorious than be forgotten. Better to live in infamy, they figure, than insignificance. •

Who decides if gays should serve?

MILITARY COUP

By Nathaniel Frank

This fall the Clinton administration's "don't ask, don't tell" policy on gays in the military received a seal of approval from the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit—the fourth appellate court to uphold the policy since it was first announced. In this particular case, a lower court had struck down the policy for violating both the free speech and equal protection clauses of the Constitution, by requiring that only gay—and not straight—soldiers keep their sexual orientation secret and remain

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celibate both on and off base. But the three-judge appeals panel reversed the lower court's decision, suggesting that the only place military policy can be written is the Pentagon. "Courts are ill-suited to second-guess military judgments that bear upon military capability or readiness," wrote the panel. The plaintiffs are now considering whether to appeal to the Supreme Court, but the Court has already refused to consider challenges to the policy in four other cases.

Thus, the courts seem poised to become the third and final branch of government to have shirked responsibility over the issue of gays in the military. By handing over decision-making power to a small minority of military men and their supporters, the courts have failed to exercise their constitutional duty to ensure that providing for the common defense does not trump the laws, rights, and ideals being defended. This is troubling both because the policy that has emerged is deeply flawed and, most significantly, because it is a cardinal principle of democracy that civilian authorities should control the unelected military.

Back in the heady days of Clinton's first campaign for the presidency, that principle seemed secure. At the time, Pentagon regulations banned all homosexuals from serving in the military, but candidate Clinton promised that he would issue a presidential directive lifting the ban. Almost immediately upon taking office, he directed his then-defense secretary, the late Les Aspin, to begin reviewing the issue. But Clinton's move aroused an uproar of opposition—not just from the ranks of the military but from members of Congress sympathetic to their views. Congress, led by members such as Senator Sam Nunn, threatened to preempt Clinton by making the ban on gays in the armed services part of the U.S. code—as opposed to just a Defense Department regulation. But rather than holding his ground and vowing to fight potential opposition from Congress—as President Harry Truman did when he issued his presidential directive integrating the military in 1948—Clinton agreed to a compromise. Having entered office with a murky draft record and a shaky relationship with the military, Clinton was wary of taking on the men in uniform. And so he agreed with Nunn that Congress would hold hearings on the matter and that his administration would abide by whatever emerged.

Unfortunately, during the nine days of Senate hearings that ensued, Congress showed that it too was unwilling to exercise genuine leadership in the face of the military's obstinacy. Senators fixated on the testimony of those opposed to lifting the ban, witnesses who spoke repeatedly about "discipline," "morale," "cohesion," and "national security." Phrases like "the military is unique" and "the military is not a democracy" were heard over and over again, as was the reminder that the Constitution does not guarantee a right to serve in the Armed Forces. After the hearings, Congress passed a statute requiring the Defense Department to discharge openly gay soldiers. In a finding accompanying the statute, Congress explained that "the presence in the armed forces of persons who demonstrate a propensity or intent to engage in homosexual acts would create an unacceptable risk to the high standards of morale, good order and discipline, and unit cohesion that are the essence of military capability." Based on the statute, the Defense Department approved the "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

Yet no one has actually been able to link gays serving openly in the military with impaired readiness or combat effectiveness. In fact, a major study commissioned by the military concluded that gays *could* serve openly as long as the policy received firm support from senior military leaders. The study, which cost taxpayers $1.3 million, was conducted in 1993 by the influential Rand Corporation, a research group with established ties to the military. According to *The New York Times*, Pentagon officials have since acknowledged that they never took the Rand report seriously because the Joint Chiefs of Staff were uncomfortable with its implications.

The military is aware, of course, that raw homophobia is not a tenable rationale for denying gays their civil rights. And so its leaders have fallen back on an argument that caters to the prejudices of heterosexual soldiers: namely, that avowed homosexuals make straight soldiers uncomfortable, threatening unit cohesion and military readiness. But the military's argument buckles under the weight of its inconsistencies.

Consider the case of women. By the government's own logic, lesbians are punished for no reason at all. Research has shown that women are much less concerned about living and working with gays than their male counterparts are. Nevertheless, women, who made up only 14 percent of the Armed Forces in 1997, accounted for 22 percent of discharges for sexual orientation; in 1996, women made up 13 percent of service members and 29 percent of sexual-orientation discharges.

Instead of confronting military leaders with the flaws of their argument, Congress chose to cater blindly to their fears. The result has been a policy that has been at least as bad for gays as the original ban. Furthermore, discharges have ballooned since the policy first took effect: the military booted 997 gay troops in 1997, a 67 percent increase over the 597 discharged in 1994. Command violations—asking or pursuing by military officials—have increased steadily as well. The Service-members Legal Defense Network, an independent watchdog group that documents violations in the field, reports that command violations have swelled every year since the policy took effect, reaching 563 in 1997.

In short, in place of exercising their democratic duty, the courts, Congress, and the White House have given the men of the military carte blanche to impose their own brand of justice on the citizens they serve. Is this a brand of justice worth fighting for?

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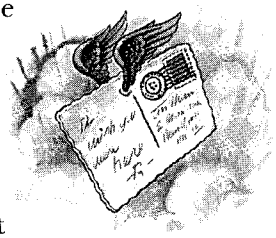
GAZA POSTCARD

MIXED SIGNALS

By Hillel Halkin

It was a grand day for the Palestinians. And in the course of it I thought of a remark Maria Mohammedi made. Maria, director of the Arts and Crafts Village of the municipality of Gaza, and an Algerian married to a Palestinian, actually made the remark twice, because the first time it was drowned out by two green-and-white helicopters. Passing low overhead, they were ferrying Bill Clinton and Yasir Arafat from Gaza's newly opened international airport to Arafat's residence in the Rimal quarter of Gaza. As they started descending toward the sea, and the Gazans in nearby al-Katiba Square lowered the hands that had been shading upward-cast eyes, Maria answered a question I had asked. "Very different," she said of the two people she has lived with. "The Algerians say what they think. The Palestinians say what you want to hear. They're like...." She wriggled a hand as if it was a fish out of water.

She was talking of social, not political, behavior. A firm supporter of the Palestinian cause, she was not seeking to strengthen my doubts about it. But my thoughts drifted back to her. For, ostensibly, the whole point of convening the Palestinian National Council (PNC) in Gaza in the extraordinary presence of an American president was to allay, once and for all, Israeli apprehensions that the Palestinians do not mean what they say when they declare their willingness to settle for a mini-state, in Gaza and the West Bank, that will live peacefully alongside Israel. This was the reason for resuscitating the basically defunct PNC one last time, long enough for it to repeal a charter calling for Israel's destruction.



As such, however, it was a futile exercise. There is no way in which repeal of the charter could have achieved such a goal, no way at this juncture that the Palestinians can say or do anything that could achieve it. Many Israelis who have no objection to Palestinian statehood per se remain fearful of its irredentist potential. This is not only because they worry that Maria might be right. It is also because (contrary to what is often asserted about them) they are quite capable of putting themselves in the Palestinians' shoes. In fact, they know better than anyone else what the Palestinians have lost because it is they who now possess it. And they know how little of it, even if the Palestinians' stated demands are met, will be gotten back.

"WE HAVE A DREAM: A FREE PALESTINE" declared the posters of a thumbs-up Clinton and a V-signing Arafat decorating the streets of Gaza. But the Palestinians have two dreams, as a man in the Gaza neighborhood of Jabalya, the ex-refugee camp in which the intifada first started, put it to me that morning: the *hilm zeghir* and the *hilm kebir*, the "little dream" of a West Bank-Gaza state and the "big dream" of all of Palestine—and, from an Israeli point of view, the great unanswered question of the peace process has always been whether the Palestinians are prepared to give up the big dream for the little one.

The man in Jabalya tried to convince me that they were. "You have your country.... We want ours. Its size doesn't matter," he said. Quick to smile and quick to anger, he didn't believe the Israelis intended to let him have it. "Netanyahu isn't straight," he complained. "He goes like this. *Helk. Helk. Helk. Helk.*" Here. There. Here. There. His hand turned sharp corners like Maria's.

Some 20 men had gathered to listen, as quickly happens on any street in Gaza where a journalist stops to talk. Stools were put out on the sidewalk and cups of coffee brought—a little Palestinian national council of its own. A majority of it agreed with the stocky man. The 1967 lines were enough for a free Palestine. One man's family came from Majdal, on the Israeli side of the Gaza Strip, where the city of Ashkelon now stands; he waved dismissively at the suggestion that he still had a claim to it. "When we have peace, there will be no borders anyhow," he said. "We'll come and go among you and you among us."

There was a murmur of assent. When it comes to future relations between a Jewish and a Palestinian state, it is the Jews, not the Palestinians, who want walls. Although the Palestinians have suffered far more from the Israelis than vice versa, they are also far less afraid of them.

There are obvious reasons for this. Terror is a more frightening, if less comprehensive, weapon than bureaucratic oppression, and it has been the Palestinians' weapon of choice. And it is always the haves who fear the have-nots, just as it is the have-nots who must make a living from the haves.

But it's more than that. The Palestinians may be a minority in historical Palestine, but they still feel like the majority they have traditionally been; deep down one senses in them a quiet confidence in the vast Arab world to which they belong and in their fundamental at-homeness in it. And the Jews, a majority, continue to feel like a minority: threatened, in danger of being uprooted, overwhelmed. The same porously bordered peace that might make a tiny sovereign enclave like Gaza seem livable to its Palestinian inhabitants would make most Israelis feel precariously exposed.

The Palestinian National Council that met several hours later in the Shawa Center in downtown Gaza did what was expected of it and raised its hands. Up to the moment the session commenced, its members still had not seen the resolution they were asked to approve.

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This did not seem to bother them. Standing in clusters outside the building, they waved and slapped backs as though at a class reunion. Many had not seen each other since the PNC's last plenary session, and many could not remember when that was.

My Arabic was not good enough to follow Arafat's talk, which he vigorously delivered with what appeared to be a stiff lower lip and the rhetorical triads that are the chairman's stock-in-trade. ("There are the signs of the resurrection of Palestine! The resurrection of Palestine! The resurrection of Palestine!") When stormy applause broke out, I asked the Jordanian reporter next to me what it was for. "The release of Palestinian prisoners," he said.

A problem of cultural assumptions once again. For Israelis, men who blow up women and children are criminals who belong in jail. But in traditional Palestinian life revenge taken on the family of the killers of your family is an expected thing, as is the fact that, once a *sulha* or ceremony of reconciliation is held, the score is settled, and all punitive action ceases. What kind of reconciliation with the Israelis is it, the Palestinians ask, if the rules of the *sulha* are not obeyed?

The delegates raised their hands to reaffirm Arafat's 1996 letter to Clinton disavowing the charter's call for an armed jihad against Israel, and the president rose to thank them. Mixing folksiness with moist-eyed eloquence, he was at his best. Twice he told the PNC members that the importance of their deed was that it spoke not to the Israeli government but to the Israeli people. It was a time for the Israeli people to wince at a government that, having inherited the friendliest U.S. president in its country's history, has ineptly and unnecessarily lost his esteem.

The Palestinians loved it. For once they were waving American flags instead of burning them. Decades of frustration and paranoia at Washington being in the Jews' pocket were suddenly gone. They put on the show they were asked for and were paid well for it. The sun was shining in Gaza.

On Shuhada Street I stopped for a *shawarma*. Some young boys were standing on a street corner. Did they know who was in Gaza today?

Of course. *El-Rais* Clinton.

And about the repeal of the Palestinian National Charter?

No. What was a charter?

And where they ready to let the Jews have Haifa?

Silence. Then: "No!" said a boy.

Jaffa?

"No!" they all cried.

Safed? Tiberias? Ashdod? Beersheba?

"No, no, no, no!" It was all theirs. It was Palestine.

They were only boys. They would presumably grow up and learn to think like the men in Jabalya.

Assuming you could trust the men in Jabalya.

And wait 20 years to find out.

But Israel has to extend that trust now—or at least pretend to. There is no way for Israelis to know what goes on in Palestinian hearts. There may be no way for many Palestinians to know either. All that can be done is to take them at their word and give them every reason to stick to it.

HILLEL HALKIN is a writer and journalist who lives in Israel.

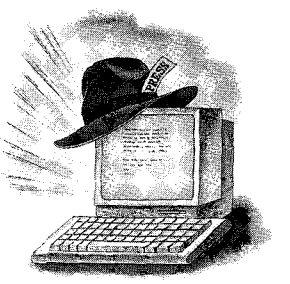
CARACAS DISPATCH

MYSTERY MAN

By Tim Padgett

Venezuelans are celebrating one of democracy's more ambiguous triumphs this month. On December 6, they elected Hugo Chávez as president with 57 percent of the vote, making him the first winner in 40 years who was not the nominee of one of the country's two dominant parties. But, as his supporters danced in the streets of Caracas, the red military berets they donned like party hats were an eerie reminder of how violently close Chávez had come to capturing the top job once before.

On February 4, 1992, Chávez, then a lieutenant colonel in the army paratrooper corps, led a bloody midnight coup bent on toppling the government of then-President Carlos Andrés Pérez. It failed, but it transformed Chávez into an overnight hero to millions of his countrymen, because his coup attempt had shattered the myth that Venezuela was a model of democratic prosperity in Latin America. Even though his uprising killed more civilians than soldiers, many Venezuelans saw it as a justified strike at their corrupt, inept, and authoritarian political elite, known as the *cogollos*. "This democracy," Chávez told me during his campaign, "had already collapsed before February 4, 1992."



He may be right. Thanks to the *cogollos*, Venezuela, a once-wealthy oil republic, has become one of the region's most inexcusable basket cases—a nation in which vast crude reserves and a cosmopolitan culture coexist with a poverty rate of 80 percent. Yet the question now is whether Chávez will replace that rotted system with new and functioning democratic institutions, as he's promised, or whether, like Peru's autocratic president, Alberto Fujimori, he will simply fill the void with a different brand of authoritarian rule. It's an important question because, given Chávez's rabid popularity in Venezuela and around the continent, the

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path he takes could have a huge impact on how Latin American democracy develops in the next century.

Chávez insists he's more democrat than demagogue: "My opponents want to paint me as Mussolini, but I'm part of a genuinely, not falsely, democratic wave." He adds that he is simply following the example of his great-grandfather, also an army colonel, who led a failed uprising against the brutal dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez back in 1914. Yet Chávez has pledged to "govern Venezuela with a hard hand" and frequently declared his political movement a "revolution" that "won't leave one member of the oligarchy standing when we're through." Such left-wing rhetoric, say his opponents, is of a piece with Chávez's public praise for Cuba's Communist dictator, Fidel Castro—as well as Chávez's alleged ties to Colombia's leftist guerrillas (which he denies).

But such concerns have been trumped by the belief of most Venezuelans, poor and middle-class, that their dysfunctional government needed a good shake-up. Violent crime has reached crisis proportions, with Caracas averaging dozens of murders each weekend. Once one of South America's verdant capitals, today the city is a paved-over monument to urban chaos and mismanagement, while tourist and business surveys consistently rank Venezuela's services as among the continent's worst. Graft is so endemic that one of the country's best-selling books is a three-volume chronicle of it called *The Dictionary of Corruption in Venezuela.*

That's why Venezuelans successfully clamored to have Chávez released from prison in 1994. And it's why they handed the 44-year-old rebel the five-year presidency. At a recent rally in Chávez's southern home state of Barinas, where Chávez learned his hard-headed nationalism from the rugged plains cowboys called *llaneros*, 21-year-old student Christian Pérez gushed about "*el comandante*" the way a student in the '60s might have fawned over Che Guevara: "He's the only leader who holds any legitimacy for my generation."

As recently as 1992, the world might have simply shrugged at Chávez's victory. Back then, the only threat Venezuela posed was its dominance in Miss Universe pageants. (One former Miss Universe finished a dismal third in the presidential race.) But today Venezuela is America's chief foreign source of oil, and U.S. officials worry that Chávez might slow down the opening of Venezuela's state-run oil industry to private and foreign investment. Chávez argues that his anti-corruption crusade will attract increased foreign investment by making Venezuelan business transparent. But Teodoro Petkoff, a socialist-turned-free-marketeer who is now outgoing President Rafael Caldera's economic-reform czar, warns that Chávez (who has also threatened to default on the nation's $22 billion foreign debt) may well return Venezuela to the disastrous statist programs of the past.

More important, Chávez's appeal extends throughout Latin America, whose citizens have a long history of falling for *caudillos*, the charismatic men on horseback who promise redemption through forceful rule. Even though popular elections are the norm in the region today, many of the new, free-market democracies have failed to check corruption, crime, and the widening chasm between rich and poor, frustrating Latin American voters. Such sentiments helped spark Fujimori's popular "self-coup" five years ago, when he shut down Peru's dysfunctional Congress in order to fight guerrilla terrorism and push through populist social welfare projects.

The Fujimori phenomenon is contagious: last year in Bolivia, for example, former dictator Hugo Banzer was elected as a civilian president. "This is a pivotal moment for democratic leadership in this region," says Jennifer McCoy, Latin America director at former President Jimmy Carter's Atlanta-based think tank, the Carter Center. "The free-market reforms were necessary, but these governments have to start meeting people's social needs and expectations now, and right now."

Turning to leaders like Fujimori is a risk, of course—as the Peruvians, who are now chafing under his authoritarian rule, have learned. Democrats hope Chávez will fulfill the promise they feel Fujimori betrayed. Chávez's platform, at least, looks encouraging. It includes reforms such as calling a constituent assembly that would rewrite Venezuela's constitution to scrap the existing Congress in favor of a more representative legislature, and creating a "fourth branch of government" to police public spending. What's more, he might have enough of a mandate to achieve it: in November's congressional and state elections, Chávez's left-of-center coalition, called the Patriotic Pole, won a plurality of governorships (even his 65-year-old father, Hugo de los Reyes Chávez, a former teacher, won the statehouse in Barinas) and a near-40 percent plurality in both chambers of Congress.

But those grandiose promises have inflated the expectations of Venezuelans. And, given the economic disaster Chávez must confront when he takes office on February 2—oil prices have fallen 40 percent this year, halving the 1999 federal budget—his critics think it's just a matter of time before he panics and reverts to what one former Cabinet minister refers to as "the emergency, military instincts we've already seen from him." That, in turn, raises the specter of another coup, since Venezuela's military is deeply divided over Chávez's election.

The good news is that, at least for the moment, Chávez is sending out conciliatory signals, reaching out to business and crucial investor nations like the United States (which has decided to reissue him the entrance visa it took away after his coup attempt). After all, Chávez's idol is Simón Bolívar, the Venezuelan who liberated South America from Spain in the nineteenth century. And, like Bolívar, Chávez harbors both democratic and authoritarian impulses. Washington has little choice but to hope that his better nature wins out.

TIM PADGETT is *Time* magazine's Latin America bureau chief.

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AMERICA THE O.K.

By Gregg Easterbrook

I don't wish to alarm you, but American life is getting better. Crime has fallen sharply. The economy is booming. Teen pregnancy is declining. The federal budget is in surplus. The air and water are getting cleaner. Health is improving by almost every measure, including the first-ever decline in cancer incidence. Deaths in accidents are decreasing. Standards of living continue to improve. The use of drugs and cigarettes is waning. Levels of education keep rising. Women and minorities are acquiring an ever-larger slice of the national pie. Personal liberty has never been greater, while American culture becomes more and more diverse. Even home runs are at an all-time high!

Yet the steady betterment of American life is practically a taboo subject for intellectual debate. Left-wing thinkers shy from it because it smacks of triumphalism or simply spoils the doomsday script. Right-wing thinkers are terrified of having to admit that recent decades of progress have occurred under a regime of strong central government. Pundits and politicians see only calamity—in 1995, Newt Gingrich called the United States "a civilization in danger of simply falling apart"—while the country around them indecorously gets better. Right now, Washington is busily sinking to an all-time low in the disconnect between governors and governed, obsessively generating an institutional crisis, in part, just to make sure there's some really bad news.

To the extent favorable trends are remarked upon, they are often treated as ephemera of a strong economy—though impressive social transitions, such as pollution reduction, exist outside the business cycle. Notes Orlando Patterson, a Harvard sociologist: "It's astonishing how the Washington and New York elites, the people who benefit most from the improvement of the United States, are so out of sync with it, endlessly talking about how things are getting worse when the country is clearly improving."

As David Whitman points out in his cogent new book, *The Optimism Gap*, polls show that personal optimism is at or near record levels—most people rating their own prospects around eight on a scale of ten—but national optimism has never been lower, most people thinking that the country is in decline. Whitman calls this the "I'm O.K., they're not" syndrome. Failure to heed the improvement of the United States feeds cynicism and robs us of valid congratulation: after race riots, Vietnam, and stagflation, isn't it good for everyone if America can like what it sees in the mirror again? And inattention to the optimistic deprives public thought of the chance to benefit from the lessons of successful reform.

Of course, there are gloomy trends, worst among them the persistence of poverty. Today, about 13 percent of U.S. households live below the poverty level, which seems ever less tolerable as the nation grows richer. As Michael Novak has noted, when the Bible declared, "You always have the poor with you," the context was a feudal agrarian economy in which some poverty was unavoidable. Today's high-tech, knows-no-obstacle economy could transfer enough goods to everyone, and, until it does, a sword will hang over American abundance.

And, of course, the international scene presents anxieties. Beyond the specters of war and ethnic hostility, the developing world's ecosystems continue to deteriorate. Global population will rise to around nine billion before stabilizing in the twenty-first century. This means the world must eventually feed, educate, employ, and care for the health of a human race half again its present size. There's no way the United States will be able to sit out that great challenge and no sign we are preparing for it.

But, overall, the American scene is progressively more encouraging. Let's review the facts:

ACCIDENTS. Despite the sirens-and-carnage images projected by local TV news, accidents have been declining pretty much across the board for more than a decade. In 1985, 40 Americans out of every 100,000 died accidental deaths; by 1996, the rate was down to 35 of 100,000, a twelve percent decline. Workplace fatalities dropped spectacularly during this period, from about 11,600 in 1985 to 6,218 in 1997. Traffic fatalities have been declining, too, and in 1997 reached a record low of just 1.6 deaths per 100 million miles driven, the smallest such figure since federal agencies began keeping traffic-death statistics in the 1960s. Highway fatalities are going down in absolute numbers—in 1984, there were 46,200 traffic deaths, for example, versus 41,967 in 1997—even as there are more people driving more cars at faster speeds for more total miles.

On a related front, building fires are steadily declining.

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The National Fire Protection Association reports that the total number of "structure" fires in the United States went from three million in 1980 to slightly less than two million in 1996. Jill Leovy recently reported in the *Los Angeles Times* that, in her city, building fires fell from 8,557 in 1979 to 3,406 in 1997. Firefighters now have so much free time that they are teaching boating and bicycle safety. More than 6,000 Americans died in home fires in 1960; in 1996, just 2,900 did, though the population had risen almost 50 percent through the period. Trends like this have nothing to do with the economy.

What's behind such developments? Liability pressure, consumer activism, and improving technology have made cars notably safer. Automakers spent years resisting air bags and crash-impact engineering, claiming cars would become exorbitantly expensive while losing functionality. Instead, auto offerings are getting zippier and roomier—today's Ford Taurus, loaded with new safety features plus air-conditioning and a CD player, costs 70 percent less in real-dollar terms than a Model T did. Never underestimate the ability of industry to make products less dangerous—or excuse corporations from doing so.

While auto manufacturers have improved the safety engineering of products, crusades against drunken driving, plus lower legal tolerance for the same, have had the desired effect. Once, to get behind the wheel after knocking back a few was viewed as boys-will-be-boys behavior; now, it's viewed as idiocy and dishonor. The lesson: Public awareness campaigns really can work.

The drop in fires stems from a similar mix of awareness, regulation, and better management. In the past 20 years, smoke detectors have become ubiquities, a reform driven both by government rules and awareness campaigns. Federal regulators have required increasingly strict standards for fire-resistance in products and building materials. Local fire codes have become ever-tighter: Scottsdale, Arizona, now requires built-in sprinklers in every newly constructed room, even confessional booths. Fire departments and building-code writers have switched from a philosophy of fire fighting to one of prevention, with an emphasis on careful inspections of buildings or blueprints. Many big-city fire departments are becoming ambulance departments that fight fires as a sidelight. It's a wonderful transition.

CRIME. Homicide is down about 20 percent from the level of the early '90s; in 1997, it reached the lowest rate in 30 years. During the '80s, Brooklyn averaged two murders per day; last March, Brooklyn went a full week without a homicide for the first time in a generation. Crime is down in nearly every category, including burglary and robbery. Since 1993, not only has the felony rate dropped, but the total number of violent felonies has fallen 14 percent, even while the population continues to grow. As Gordon Witkin has written, "It's hard to think of a social trend with greater significance."

Many factors are at play here, among them the sheer reduction in perpetrators. Tougher laws and sentences have led to a furious rate of incarceration, with 1.8 million Americans now jailed, more than double the figure of a decade ago. The shift toward "community policing" has helped, though felonies are also falling in cities that have not adopted this system. It's important to note that, while most policing has improved in the past decade, there has been no national initiative on this score, just lots of local experiments.

The adoption of James Q. Wilson's "broken windows" theory of civic propriety has helped, too. Annoying as New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani's anti-jaywalking campaign might be, there is no doubt that an environment in which people take petty laws seriously creates sociological pressure to respect the sort of laws we really care about. Putting more officers on the street has helped, as has the upgunning of law enforcement. During the '80s, when most police carried revolvers, drug-runners had superior weapons. Now that half of all cops bear the high-rate-of-fire Glock semiautomatic, only a fool would try to shoot his way out of an arrest.

Conspicuous in recent crime trends is the decline of crack. The nature of this drug product—packaged for volume sales of inexpensive rocks that produce only a brief high, requiring the user to make multiple purchases—made it a street-corner enterprise. Lots of salesmen were needed, so the young and intemperate were recruited. As Alfred Blumstein, a criminologist at Carnegie Mellon University, describes it, crack crews carrying wads of cash themselves became the targets of crime, and, since drug dealers who were robbed couldn't exactly dial 911, they armed themselves. The result was thousands of teenagers toting guns in tense situations.

Thus, not the intoxicating effects of crack but its distribution by armed, fidgety teenagers caused the '80s homicide wave. Nearly all the murder surge occurred among under-30 males; the homicide rate in other groups actually declined during the very period of the murder epidemic. Leading the current homicide decline is a rapid drop in killings among those under 30—though the rate among those under 18 remains historically high.

Then there's the "younger brother effect." The '90s generation of inner-city kids, having seen the medically destructive effects of crack and the self-genocide it produced in minority communities, wants little to do with the opiate of the '80s. Crack use continues, but mostly among older addicts who do their buying from a new breed of dealers, who work from client lists and beepers, avoiding street confrontations.

For police, an essential policy shift was a campaign against weapons possession. Traditionally, police departments have looked the other way regarding guns alone: If someone had an illegal weapon but hadn't used it, he'd get off lightly. Beginning around 1990, patrol officers and prosecutors began going after the guns themselves. It proved easier to make cases involving traceable firearms than cases based on plastic bags of crack the suspect could claim he never saw before. Arrests of minors for weapons possession peaked in 1993; by 1994, the incidence of minors carrying firearms began to

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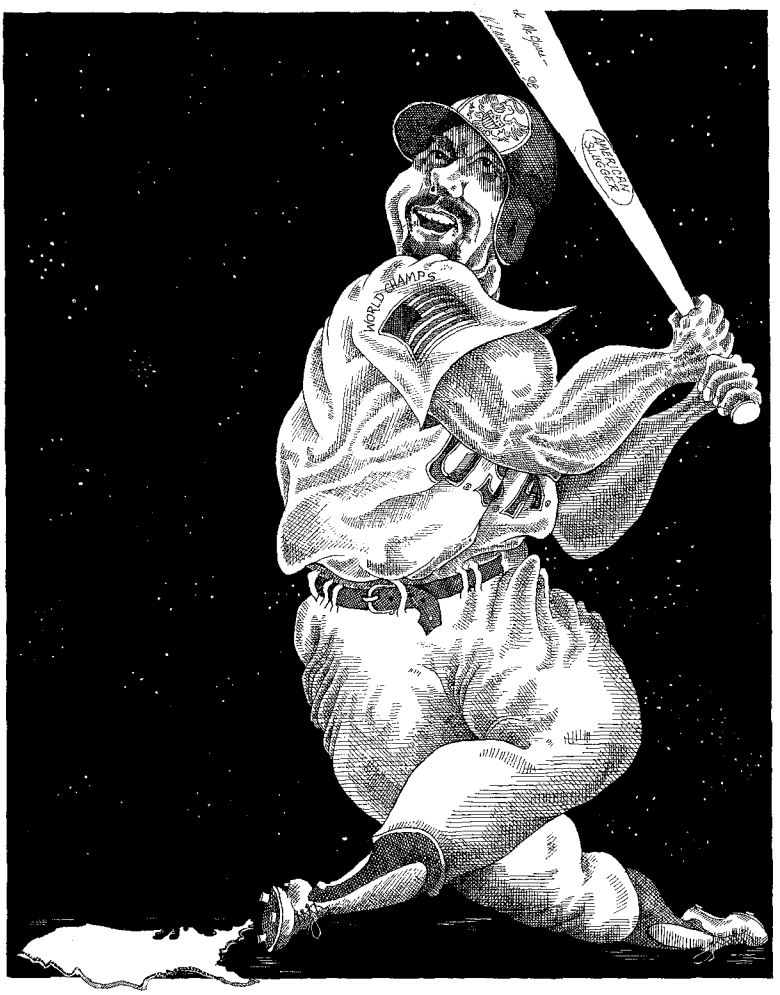
decline. Perhaps not coincidentally, it was also in 1994 that the homicide rate began its fall.

Both a growth economy and social circumstances now work against violent crime. As Jeffrey Fagan, a professor of public health at Columbia University, notes, the kids who became crack-runners in the '80s had been born into a period of upheaval: inner cities were in decline, parents were losing jobs as industry fled urban areas, welfare was pushing fathers out of homes, and, to many whose parents traversed the '60s, rioting—violent contempt for law—had briefly been seen as somehow useful to minority aspirations. Now, Fagan says, "the phase of social reorganization is basically over for the inner city." Downtown areas have stopped declining, and some are improving. People have made their peace with the new service industries, rendering legitimate employment possible again. Stability is returning, and, with it, community contempt for crime.



DRAWING BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Within the positive trends an obvious worry is that some new street drug or an economic downturn could cause a new spate of crime. But what's most striking about falling homicide rates is that they represent rapid progress in an area where bad news was widely believed inevitable. "It's possible you won't be able to solve this problem," New York Governor Mario Cuomo said of the murder rate in 1989. Nine years later, the arrows point up.

DRINK, DRUGS, AND FOOLING AROUND. Crack is hardly the only bane in decline. On the key barometer of ingestion by high school seniors, cocaine has declined from something tried by 17 percent of students in 1985 to seven percent in 1996. Twenty-two percent of high school seniors in 1975 had tried stimulant drugs; by 1996, the figure was down to 15 percent. Use of some, though not all, other illegal drugs is also down.

Even legal, socially acceptable forms of indulgence are in remission. In 1965, 42 percent of American adults smoked; today, 25 percent do. Per capita U.S. consumption of spirits has been going down for years. In 1980, 72 percent of high school seniors reported having consumed alcohol recently. This figure has gone down steadily since, falling to 51 percent in 1996. Can it be that half of America's young aren't even sneaking beers anymore?

Another entirely legal (except in Washington) form of earthly pleasure, sex, also seems in decline, at least among the supposedly incorrigible young. The portion of teenage girls reporting to have had intercourse had been climbing steadily since the '60s, a statistic commonly cited—often by middle-age commentators who themselves once devoted countless hours to the pursuit of teenage sex—as a sign of American moral erosion. Now, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, the percentage of sexually active girls ages 15 to 19 has dropped from a peak of 53 percent in 1988 to 50 percent in 1995. Teen pregnancy rates have begun to decline; in 1995, teen pregnancy fell to the same rate as that of 1975, and the downward statistical slope continues. Births to teens have dropped twelve percent since 1991. The number of teen abortions has fallen for seven consecutive years.

Smoking's decline clearly reflects improved awareness of lung cancer. Drug declines probably result from a combination of law-enforcement intensification and rising understanding of the fact that, with the possible exception of marijuana, drugs simply aren't innocuous private choices. Less drinking seems to stem from anti-drunken-driving campaigns and a changing anthropology of the social event, today less viewed as a sanctioned time during which to get schnockered (think *Virginia Woolf*) than as a time at which to sip wine and listen to music.

Less sexual activity among young people may be influenced by concern about sexually transmitted diseases and by religious feeling. A reaction against cultural pressure in favor of sex, especially the repulsively phony Hollywood and rock-video conceptions of sex, might be just as important. Teenage pregnancy decline results directly

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from higher birth control use—contraceptive use at first intercourse is up from 48 percent among females in the early '80s to 78 percent in 1995. Contraceptives are getting safer (the low-dose Pill) and more convenient (the inject-and-forget Depo-Provera). As important, probably, is a shifting sociology of birth control—which is increasingly seen as smart and responsible.

Less drug use, less drinking, less smoking, and less fooling around hardly synchronize with conventional hand-wringing about the United States as a self-indulgent, libertine realm where anything goes. Rather, these trends suggest that public habits can be moderated through awareness campaigns, rational arguments, and common sense.

THE ECONOMY. Financial situations can change rapidly, so the milk might curdle; that admonition aside, the American economic outlook is the best it's ever been. Unemployment and inflation are at their lowest points in a quarter-century. Growth is strong, though below record levels. Economic troubles elsewhere in the world seem barely to have dented the system here. Gasoline prices are at a postwar low in real-dollar terms, while mortgage rates are at 30-year lows. Industry isn't disappearing, as is commonly assumed—current U.S. industrial production is 90 percent greater than in 1970, though that figure is achieved with fewer workers. It's common to hear analysts bemoaning the fact that median household income has risen only slightly in the past quarter-century. But the standard concept doesn't take into account that fewer and fewer people live in the median household: factor that in, and household income is up about 15 percent since 1970. The only major negative indicators are the savings rate and the balance-of-trade deficit. As problems go, that's not bad.

The transition from federal deficit to surplus should remind us how often "impossible" problems are solved. Think back to the hollow legislative rituals of the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings law, written to be vacuous on the assumption that real deficit reduction simply could not happen. Now the federal balance sheet has improved so much that lower government borrowing helps drive down interest rates, benefiting everyone. And this has been accomplished without punitive taxation. As Derek Bok pointed out in his 1996 *The State of the Nation,* the American tax burden is 27 percent of GDP, versus 44 percent in France or 50 percent in Sweden.

Having lived the past few years in Europe, I often heard Euros express astonishment at the American economic engine. How could it be, they would ask, that your system has so much litigation, adversarial confrontation, hype, spin, glibness, and overwrought scandal, and yet functions so marvelously? I liked to reply that lawsuits, hype, spin, and scandal must in some way aid American success, forcing our society to accept perpetual change. The sincere answer might be that positive trends in U.S. national wealth have been sparked by ever-greater acceptance of true market economics, with its tumult and endless unanticipated results.

"It's only in the last generation that most people have been converted to the belief that market economics is good for everybody, not just a tool of the wealthy," says John Mueller, a political scientist at the University of Rochester and a rising star in the study of what makes societies run well. Stagflation stopped after Jimmy Carter began deregulation, freeing air travel, energy, and telecommunications. National economic performance shot upward not long thereafter, and, though not all results of deregulation have been favorable, each year brings more evidence that the country is better off with market forces driving most decisions.

ENVIRONMENT. Twenty-five years ago, only one-third of America's lakes and rivers were safe for fishing and swimming; today two-thirds are, and the proportion continues to rise. Annual wetlands loss has fallen by 80 percent in the same period, while soil losses to agricultural runoff have been almost cut in half. Total American water consumption has declined nine percent in the past 15 years, even as the population expands, especially in the arid Southwest. Since 1970, smog has declined by about a third, even as the number of cars has increased by half; acid rain has fallen by 40 percent; airborne soot particles are down 69 percent, which is why big cities have blue skies again; carbon monoxide or "winter smog" is down 31 percent; airborne lead, a poison, is down 98 percent. Emissions of CFCs, which deplete stratospheric ozone, have all but ended.

Other environmental measures are almost uniformly positive. Toxic emissions by industry declined 46 percent from 1988 to 1996, even as petrochemical manufacturers enjoyed record U.S. production and copious profits. About one-third of Superfund toxic waste sites are now cleaned up, with the pace of cleanup accelerating. The forested acreage of the United States is expanding, with wildlife numbers up in most areas, led by the comeback of eastern deer, now thought to be at pre-colonial numbers. Since the Endangered Species Act was passed, only a few U.S. species have fallen extinct, not the thousands predicted, while species such as the bald eagle, gray whale, and peregrine falcon have recovered enough to no longer require full legal protection. Only two major U.S. environmental gauges are now negative: continuing inaction against greenhouse gases and continuing loss of wildlife habitats to urban expansion.

An important conceptual lesson is being learned: When pollution stops, natural recovery does not require ponderous geological time. Consider Boston Harbor, whose filth was an issue in George Bush's 1988 campaign against Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis. Even as Bush filmed his memorable commercial standing on the sludge-caked Boston shore, a $4 billion water treatment plant was rising in the background. At the time, most experts predicted that it would take 50 years or more to rinse the harbor. Instead, cleanup has been so rapid that Boston Harbor is already safe again for swimming and fishing. Activists, who once had to rail against sludge by the ton, are down to complaining

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about detection in the harbor of trace parts-per-billion or even parts-per-trillion of compounds. As Paul Levy, who ran the first phase of the cleanup project, has said, the fact that activists now remonstrate about smaller and smaller issues shows that the big issues are under control.

The left side of the environmental debate can't seem to deal with the fact that technology has (for the moment, at least) entered a relatively benign phase in which products and industrial processes consume steadily fewer resources and produce steadily less waste. Says Jesse Ausubel, director of the environment program at Rockefeller University and a leading thinker in the new field of industrial ecology: "The larger lesson here is about the sparing of resources," driven by new technological ideas. The right can't seem to deal with the fact that, if it weren't for ecological regulations, most positive trends in the environment would not have happened. Tailpipe controls on automobiles, for example, not only cleared the air but also saved the car industry. If cars still spewed smog as they once did, Los Angeles's air would be poison gas; mandatory driving bans would be unavoidable.

Because the character of environmental progress is nonideological—reflecting well both on federal initiatives and on business—neither political camp knows how to extol what's happened. That no interest group sees itself as benefiting from public awareness of environmental success might be just a political foible, but it has the effect of preventing commentators and voters from focusing on the locus of the real environmental emergencies—the developing world.

HEALTH. Both incidence and death rates for cancer began to ebb in the early '90s, reversing a 20-year trend of increase. Cancer incidence, or the occurrence of new cases, had risen about 1.2 percent per year from 1973 to 1990; since then, incidence has fallen by almost one percent per year, with the decline manifesting in the big-four cancer forms (lung, prostate, breast, and colon-rectum) for both genders and across all major age and ethnic groups other than black males. Mortality for most cancers is now either level (as it is for breast cancer) or in slight decline. Only melanoma and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma are now rising.

By nearly all other measures, U.S. public health is getting steadily better. Heart disease and stroke are both in decline relative to population growth, with heart disease deaths, the number-one medical killer, falling 3.4 percent from 1996 to 1997. Infant mortality is now down to 0.7 percent of live births, the lowest such figure ever for the United States. (Some European countries do slightly better.) AIDS deaths are declining markedly in the United States. The rate of suicides is declining, falling 4.6 percent in 1997. There are a few worrisome public-health trends, such as the reappearance of TB and the emergence of microbes that resist currently available antibiotics. But, in the main, public health is getting better by leaps and bounds.

Most remarkable is the continued rise in life expectancy, now 76 years at birth for the typical American, up from 54 years when the World War II generation was being born. The rise in life expectancy is global, expressing itself in nearly every country in the world, outside Central Africa. Indeed, the reason there is global population growth is not that the world's women are having more babies—per capita they are having steadily fewer, even in developing nations—but that people the world over are living so much longer.

Most of what's going on in public health appears to be a mix of advancing medical knowledge and public awareness. The biggest factor in the cancer decline, for example, is the drop in smoking. Heart disease decline has been aided by better drugs, better therapy (the coronary-artery bypass operation, touch-and-go 20 years ago, has gotten so much more efficacious that it's now working even for the elderly), and advancing understanding of lifestyle issues such as fat intake. The improving sophistication of medical education and other factors are also at play.

Better public health hasn't come cheaply: medical spending was seven percent of GDP in 1970 and is almost 14 percent now. Yet, much as you may detest your HMO, keep in mind that most trends in health care costs are favorable, too. During the late '80s, costs were rising so rapidly that it was common to predict that 15 to 20 percent of GDP would be spent on health care by the end of the century. If that had happened, American prosperity would have been damaged. Instead, in the past five years, there has been little medical inflation. Managed care creates annoying preapproval hassles and longer waits for some appointments. But on the key points—protecting health at an affordable cost—the system is doing well.

PUBLIC DEBATE. Despite so many auspicious indicators, the America depicted in political and intellectual debate is invariably a place we should be building starships to flee. To the left, the United States remains a land of racial and sexual repression, corporate oligarchy, and environmental decay; to the right, a country where all things pure are collapsing. Such views hold considerable sway. Whitman's *The Optimism Gap* reports that 1996 polls showed that only 15 percent of Americans believe the country is getting better. In similar polls, about half said the nation is worse off compared to how it was when their parents were growing up, and 60 percent believed the United States in which their children dwell will be worse still. Though most Americans are today healthier, better housed, better fed, better paid, better educated, better defended, more free, and diverted by a cornucopia of new entertainment products and services, somehow they've managed to convince themselves their parents had it better during the Dust Bowl.

As Robert J. Samuelson noted in his skillful *The Good Life and Its Discontents*, the revolution of rising expectations has taken on a life of its own: "[T]here can never be enough prosperity." (Polls now suggest that, regardless of how much money an American has, he or she believes that twice as much is required.) Samuelson further contends that one reason for all the unfocused

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anxiety is that the media have gotten so much better at emphasizing things to worry about. Tropical storms that *might* hit the United States get more network coverage than any favorable turn of events.

Television crime coverage, especially, now seems pitched to cause civic fright, while movies and network entertainment programming depict violence as far more pervasive than it actually is. As Christopher Jencks, a professor of government at Harvard University, notes: "When I was growing up there was violence on TV, but it was cowboys having shootouts. I never worried that rustlers would come over the hill into my neighborhood. Now the violence on television is presented as if it's about to get you personally. Every screen you look at, at home or in theaters, has something disastrous on it. No wonder people think the country is out of control."

Conservative thinkers and politicians seem distressed by the contemporary milieu in part because Americans are more or less willingly adopting gender equality and cultural openness, including a culture in which minority writing and art are being admitted to the canon. (Recent polls have found that three of the most admired people in the United States are Colin Powell, Oprah Winfrey, and Michael Jordan.) The political and academic left can't stand the contemporary milieu in part because class war, economic breakdown, and environmental calamity seem less and less likely. "The left elites talk with obsessive negativism about the religious right because it's one of the few things they can find to still get upset about," notes Orlando Patterson of Harvard. "The right elite is similarly obsessive about the supposed culture war, when all the evidence is that the United States is becoming ever more tolerant and ever more at peace with diversity."

Of course, generations at least as far back as Plato have felt that nations were sweetly ordered in their youths but now decline. "When we think about the past, we focus on our childhoods, to a time when our parents protected us from the world," Jencks notes. "Now as adults, even if society's gotten better, the sense of being sheltered is gone. Nobody's taking care of you anymore, so it feels like everything is getting more worrisome, even if objectively it's getting better." Mueller of the University of Rochester has memorably phrased it this way: "Golden ages do happen, but we are never actually *in* them."

RACE. As William Julius Wilson has extensively documented, attention to the problems of inner-city dysfunction causes us to overlook what history will judge as the big racial story of late-twentieth-century America: the emergence of a black middle class.

Through the last generation, the portion of African Americans living in middle-class circumstances has more than doubled. Some kind of watershed was crossed in 1994, when the average income of black families in Queens, long a community treated as symbolic of working-class to middle-class transition, surpassed the average income of white families there. Georgia, Maryland, and other states now contain large, economically independent black middle-class areas where life is suburban, family structures conventional, and values entirely middle-American.

African American income still lags significantly behind that of whites, but, as Steven Holmes has written, in the past few years poverty rates "have dipped below 30 percent of black households for the first time in the country's history." Black male college graduates now make, on average, twelve percent less than their white counterparts, a much smaller gap than a generation ago, while black female college grads now earn slightly more than white female grads. Jencks's 1972 book, *Inequality*, argued that, even if minority education rose, minority income levels would not, owing to barriers of prejudice. Jencks now feels the situation has changed, with minority education "look[ing] far more important than it did in the 1960s," because African American accomplishment in school can now translate into economic success.

Minority educational accomplishment continues to improve. In 1996, black high school graduation rates became about the same as white rates—needless to say, a historical first. The black-white math SAT score gap, which was 140 points in 1976, is 110 points now, owing to black improvement, not white erosion. Bok and William Bowen write in *The Shape of the River* that, although African Americans entering most colleges have lower overall grades and SAT scores than white schoolmates, on the real-world test of what they do when they leave the university, top black students now have about the same career achievement as top whites.

At the turn of this century, many African Americans weren't even literate; today, the college-completion rates of black Americans exceed the comparable figures for much of Europe. If one views African Americans as an immigrant cohort that "arrived" in the United States with the passage of the civil rights laws, black rates of social progress are similar to those previously displayed by white ethnic immigrant groups, which typically required two to three generations to join the establishment.

STANDARDS OF LIVING. Living standards are improving so fast and so consistently that to mention them today seems almost banal. Most fundamental is housing. The typical contemporary home is 40 percent larger than a 1970 house, while only three percent of Americans, the lowest percentage ever, live in overcrowded conditions, defined as more than one person per room. That every person should have at least one room to call his or her own is a social innovation of the American present. The majority of today's dwellings have air-conditioning and other improvements. More than half of Americans now live in suburbs, which may be superficial and intellectually insufferable but are physically pleasant: the reason they are popular.

The metric of living standards is rising so rapidly that merely how to track its ascent has become a controversy, centering on whether the Consumer Price Index

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adequately recognizes such once-rare, now-quotidian indicators as computer ownership or eating out. Another way to meter the evolution of living standards, championed by Richard Alm and W. Michael Cox in the forthcoming book *Myths of Rich and Poor,* is how long the typical person must work to acquire consumer items. Between rising wages and larger dwellings, for example, in 1956 the typical worker had to invest 16 weeks at labor to buy 100 square feet of home; now the figure has fallen to less than 14 weeks. The McDonald's brothers' first burgers cost half an hour of work at the time; now 180 seconds buys one. Only health care and university-level education are growing more expensive when measured by work hours required for purchase.

"A seven-day Caribbean cruise," Alm and Cox write, "slipped from 51 hours in 1972 to 45 hours in 1997." Not only are they getting cheaper, excursions on 42-deck luxury liners with names like *Insatiable Princess* are another indication of the rising standard of living: such experiences may be stupefying, but what matters is that they are becoming standard middle-class events. Leisure and tourism barely existed as economic sectors a generation ago; today they are a hefty slice of the GDP.

As Robert J. Samuelson has written, overall the U.S. standard of living has continued to rise in the '80s and '90s roughly as rapidly as it did in the '50s and '60s; it's just that we now take out a considerable share of national wealth in forms that don't show up well in price indexes, such as better health, cleaner air, and the ability to fly anywhere, anytime, at an affordable price.

WEDLOCK. The family-breakup wave may have crested. The divorce rate, which was 2.5 per 1,000 people in 1966, peaked at 5.3 per 1,000 in 1981. The rate leveled off in the early '90s at about 4.7 and now appears to be in a shallow decline. A few years ago, half of all new marriages were expected to fail; now only 40 percent are, with the average length of a marriage starting to creep back up again. And Census Bureau figures suggest that the reduction in conventional two-parent families—which dominated American demographics from 1970 to 1990—is "flattening" and might be about to end.

Whether the decline of divorce is just a blip or suggests some larger social trend can't be determined by only a few years of data. But it's worth noting that sociologists and writers have spent the past decade elaborately documenting the fact that, whatever it means in terms of adult personal freedom, family breakup harms children. That message may be sinking in.

At first glance, there seems no single thread that runs through the subjects where life is improving. Some seem a case for more Washington: environmental protection is arguably the most impressive achievement of progressive government since the establishment of the Social Security system. But "outside of pollution control, it's hard to see where federal regulations have been the driving factor in recent social improvements," says Gary Becker, a Nobel Prize-winning economist at the University of Chicago. Economic vigor has been aided by deregulation. Crime reduction, welfare reform, and other positive trends have arisen mainly through state and local initiatives. Public health has certainly benefited from federal investments, but advancing knowledge is the primary factor. Betterment of personal behavior, such as the reduction in drunken driving, has been inspired mainly through private efforts.

It's possible that what the surge of national good news tells us is that, as pragmatism supplants ideology, society will get better at fixing things. "We're living in an age with very few romantics and revolutionaries," says Mueller of the University of Rochester. "People with vast, sweeping visions caused most of this century's problems. Most of the time you don't want leaders with visions, you want society run by cautious pragmatists. At the moment, the pragmatists are in control of most nations, and it's making things better."

It's possible that the upswing in good news tells us that reform initiatives of the '60s and '70s have finally begun to work. Pollution-control regulations, affirmative action programs, crime crackdowns—all started off clunky and problem-plagued, but, as the snafus were ironed out, results began to flow. And it's possible that what the late-century tidings convey is simply what the United States would have looked like all along if so much of its brainpower and resources had not been diverted to the cold war.

But what the good news unequivocally tells us is that it's never too late to change the world. In that sense, there is a bright thread running through all these examples: intractable or "impossible" dilemmas can be solved. Our efforts matter; when we attempt reform, we can be crowned with success. It is no coincidence that the aspects of life that have gotten better are those that people have dedicated themselves to improving. America can still become whatever it wants to be. We do not have to accept what we see out the window; rather, we can make the view the one of our choosing.

Knowing that reform still works should grant us courage to strive for change in areas where progress now seems "impossible." For instance, the greenhouse effect may seem unstoppable today, but that's only because we have not yet tried to stop it. There is no reason we need accept poverty: it can be bested. Polls show that, far from thinking society spends too much to lift up the poor, 60 percent of Americans think the country should take more action against poverty. So let's—because it will work!

Consider an astonishing figure: The United Nations estimates that it would cost $40 billion per year to provide the basics of life—adequate food, clean water, health care, shelter, and literacy—to every person on the planet. That works out to $151 per American. Every one of us would gladly write that check, if only there were a way to be sure the money were properly used. All that's stopping us from attempting reform of this noble magnitude is the false belief that life is rolling irrevocably downhill.

It's not, and the proof gets stronger each day. •

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BOOKS & The Arts

Stanley Kauffmann on Films

Star-Crossed Lovers

In *The Genius of Shakespeare* Jonathan Bate says that, contrary to the general impression, "We know a great deal more about Shakespeare's life than we do about the lives of his fellow-dramatists and fellow-actors." We know it from official documents, says Bate. "But . . . we do not learn very much from them about his character as it affects what we are interested in: his plays." Luckily for the gaiety of nations, this point hasn't hindered Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, co-authors of **Shakespeare in Love** (Miramax).

Stoppard said recently on TV that Norman, an American who had written such items as *Cutthroat Island* and *Waterworld*, did the first draft of this screenplay; then he was called in. Who wrote this or that scene in the final version is of course indecipherable to us, but the result is clearly the work of people who know a good deal about the Elizabethan era and theater, so much so that they can play games with the material. This picture plays some diverting ones. With most historical films the informed viewer scrutinizes in order to cluck at errors. (There are books full of such cluckings.) With *Shakespeare in Love*, the more one knows, the more one can enjoy the liberties taken.

John Madden, the director, aided by Martin Childs, the production designer, and Sandy Powell, who did the costumes, crams the London of 1593 with the hubbub and bustle and squalor and panoply that history justifies, and it's all centered on a Bankside theater, the Rose, owned by the hard-pressed Philip Henslowe. This is factual: then comes the fantasy. Young Shakespeare, actor and playwright attached to the Rose, is trying to write a play for his company, and so far he has little but the title: *Romeo and Ethel, The Pirate's Daughter*. No Elizabethan or Jacobean play's title has that sort of formulation; thus, all that remains is to find out how we get to *Romeo and Juliet*.

To begin with, Shakespeare gets advice from his coeval and rival, Christopher Marlowe (a brief, incisive appearance by Rupert Everett). But the true inspiration for the plot of his play, even for scene structure, comes from the happenstance that Shakespeare falls in love—with the daughter of a wealthy family. The fact that he has a wife and children back in Stratford doesn't hobble his passion, and the young lady, who hasn't yet learned about his family, responds. Her name is Viola, another Shakespearean promise. (Her last name is de Lesseps. Is it some sort of private joke that the authors chose the family name of the man who, 300 years later, built the Suez Canal and attempted one in Panama?)

Materials for the play, as Shakespeare keeps trying to meet his deadline, come from his experiences with Viola: her father's objection, her aristocratic fiancé, duels, a balcony scene complete with nurse, and more. I haven't seen such close correspondence between experience and art since a play about Wagner, in the 1930s, in which he is struggling to compose *Tristan*, embraces a new mistress one evening, cries "I have it!" then rushes to his piano and whams out the *Liebestod*. I was too young then to be anything but outraged; in *Shakespeare*, I thought it was an entertaining parody of the creative process, all the more entertaining because of its heat.

The screenplay also uses, with a swirling hand, a familiar Shakespearean device, the woman disguised as a man. Viola, mad for the poet, uninterested in the fiancé who has been arranged for her, transvests to become an actor in Shakespeare's theater (women of course being prohibited on the stage). This leads to a device that asks for our generosity. When we first see Viola, she has flowing blonde hair. When she appears in the theater, she has close-cropped brown hair, and we think that she has had herself shorn and dyed. But then we see her back home with the honey locks again. This back-and-forth hair-changing goes puzzlingly on. Oh, well, a fig for explanations. It's so incredible that, like Shakespeare's writing of his play (which is eventually called by its familiar name), we shrug because what's happening generally is so pleasant.

Other plot strands counterpoint the central story—Henslowe's woes with his creditors, the harrying of the theater by the Master of the Revels, the news of Marlowe's death and its effect, the presence of a 12-year-old gamin named John Webster who hangs around the theater teasing people with live mice (a hint of the man who would write *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*). Queen Elizabeth herself is the *dea ex machina*, solving all problems at the end insofar as they

FILMS WORTH SEEING

Dancing at Lughnasa. *Meryl Streep, Irish now, as one of five unmarried Donegal sisters. Sensitively done, but Brian Friel's play seems here even more glaringly a bloated one-acter. (Reviewed 11/30/98).* **Gods and Monsters.** *Ian McKellen is an exquisite dandy as the Hollywood director James Whale, who is interested erotically in his gardener. Silky texture. (12/14/98)* **Hilary and Jackie.** *Jacqueline Du Pré, the cellist who died young, and her sister. Lyric feeling along with startling eccentricities; empathy in full-bodied performances. (12/21/98)* **Very Bad Things.** *Modern morality is plumbed as the action moves from sex to murder. The screenplay wobbles increasingly, but the ensemble acting—of prosperous young Californian characters—is almost balletic. (12/14/98)* **—SK**

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can be solved. Her last line is a request to Master Shakespeare for a comedy, perhaps a play for Twelfth Night. He sets right to work; he already knows the name of the heroine.

John Madden's last film was *Mrs. Brown*, in which he deployed the relationship of Queen Victoria and John Brown with stateliness and wit. Here he has seemingly swilled some of Falstaff's sack and has had robustious, fiery fun. Judi Dench, who was his Victoria, is Elizabeth here, and no one else could be tolerated in the part. Madden's most impressive achievement, amidst all the hurly-burly, is an intimate, almost internal one. He gets a full, feeling performance from Gwyneth Paltrow as Viola. Up to now I've never seen Paltrow do anything but present the shape and exterior of roles, from Jane Austen's *Emma* to *A Perfect Murder*. With Madden's help, she puts a full-bodied, aching young woman inside her costumes, not only justifying Shakespeare's hunger for Viola but promising much for Paltrow.

Shakespeare is Joseph Fiennes, younger brother of Ralph. Joseph, more slender and dark and willowy than his brother, has had some small parts in films and some large ones in the London theater, including the Royal Shakespeare Company. Now he is (gulp) the bard himself. This is hardly the first time that Shakespeare has been a character in a dramatic work. (Even Bernard Shaw used him—in a one-act play, *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*, where he implores Elizabeth to found a national theater.) Still, it can't be a role an actor steps into blithely. His best advantage is that, as Bate tells us, little is really known about the man's character. Ben Jonson said he was of "an open and free nature," then added that he had "gentle expressions, wherein he flowed with that facility that sometimes it was necessary that he should be stopped.... His wit was in his own power; would the rule of it had been, too." But this semi-generous description, one of the few accounts that survive, isn't of much relevance to an actor who wants to play a Shakespeare who is a model for his own Romeo.

Fiennes carries the day. He is lithe, strong, hot, with an attractive voice. The part isn't widely varied, so his performance isn't, either; but he moves through this film with the surreal effect of a flashing rapier. His Shakespeare puts the seal on the pact between us and the film. "Very well, this is not fact," we concede. "Then let it be gratifying fiction." And it is. •

Robert Brustein on Theater

The Las Vegas Show

To get there, you have to fly over the vast gorges of the Grand Canyon until the Colorado empties out into Lake Mead. Once past this spectacular array of natural splendor, you are rewarded with a terrific view of the Hoover Dam, one of the great engineering triumphs of the '30s. Then, almost immediately, with bluffs, tablelands, and mesas still visible in all directions, the aircraft is circling another awe-inspiring manmade construction—the glittering city of Las Vegas, nestled in a plain between mountains and desert, perhaps the most stupendous tribute to the power of artifice and the appetite for glut in the history of the planet.

On my last trip I addressed a meeting of the David Mamet Society at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. What city could be better suited to host a conference celebrating the theatrical master of the scam? My pretext for this more recent visit was an invitation by the English and theater departments of the university to talk on a topic of my choosing. I also wanted the opportunity to see the new show being presented by the Cirque du Soleil. The title I offered for my talk was "The Decline of Culture." I didn't realize until I started speaking how hopelessly premeditated that topic would sound, but I had chosen it with no conscious intent to impugn my hosts or their city. When I arrived at the podium, I began to feel a bit like Joseph Cotten in *The Third Man*, an impostor babbling away on a subject that confused the audience and embarrassed him. To tell the truth, I have a sneaking affection for Las Vegas. It is (or it used to be) the closest thing I know to total immersion in the fleshpots of antiquity. The decline of culture indeed. Las Vegas doesn't so much represent the degeneration of civilization as its evolution into a new kind of civic mutation.

I began to realize that there was more here to review than the Cirque du Soleil; that perhaps I ought to review Las Vegas itself. But how does one approach a production of such scope and magnitude? Awash in neon twenty-four hours a day, Las Vegas is one of the wildest Wild West shows on earth—a conglomerate epic extravaganza in which the come-on, the shill, the barker's patter, constitute almost the entire offering.

In the early days, the basic purpose, indeed the exclusive idea, behind Las Vegas was to stimulate the gambling glands. (Lenny Bruce renamed it "Lost Wages.") Hotels virtually gave away their food, drink, and lodging in order to draw the suckers to the tables. Gambling, of course, is still the city's major industry. Almost the entire ground floor of each cavernous and sprawling megahotel, some of which take up as many as three city blocks, is devoted to relieving you of your cash. You cannot find the registration desk or the coffee shop without walking through acres and acres of slot machines and gaming tables, without hearing tons of silver dollars rattling through the chutes. The weekend I was there, an elderly woman of sixty-seven hit the Megabucks machine and went home with $264 million in cash. Nowhere is America's obsession with instant wealth exploited more efficiently than in these trackless gambling wastes, where thousands of funereal characters, many of them women, huddle over machines like wraiths. I had visions of the damned in one of Dante's circles of Hell ("I had not thought death had undone so many").

Still, something decidedly odd has been happening to Las Vegas lately. Like Broadway, which it resembles in so many ways, it is being scrubbed, homogenized, transformed into Disneyland. In the early days, Las Vegas hotels were identified by such mildly exotic titles as the Sands, the Tropicana, and the Flamingo, reflecting their desert origins and the limited vocabulary of the visionaries who conceived them—romantics such as Bugsy Siegel and Meyer Lansky. Today, the newer hotels are theme parks with names to match—the MGM Grand, the Mirage, the Luxor, the Desert Inn, Treasure Island, not to mention the most recent, most extravagant addition to the bunch, Steve Wynn's Bellagio.

Bellagio cost billions to build, and features an art collection estimated at $240 million. Ads for the hotel impudently answer an unasked question—"Because you can't sleep at the Louvre"—while a sign in the lobby triumphantly announces: "Appearing nightly: Picasso! Monet! Van Gogh!" I suppose it is relevant that Wynn borrowed the name of his hotel from a villa on Lake Como, to which the Rockefeller Foundation invites scholars and artists both for the purpose of group conferences and for pursuing work on

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individual projects. An air of artistic and intellectual pretense hangs heavy over the velvet public rooms of Bellagio.

Alas, this air has also infected the atmosphere of the Cirque du Soleil, which has become one of the central features of Bellagio. Each of the hotels has traditionally featured some sort of nightly attraction, whether Bobby Darin or David Cassidy or a big girlie show like "Enter the Night," where silicone-heavy exotic dancers compete for your attention with acrobatic ice skaters. Representing the more wholesome family appeal of the new Las Vegas are the attractions of the Cirque du Soleil. This Québecois institution has had one show, called *Mystère*, playing at Treasure Island since 1993, in a theater expressly designed for it. The new show at Bellagio, performed by a second company, is called *O*. It has been lodged in a $72 million, 1,800-seat palace built to the specifications of a horseshoe-shaped European opera house. At $90-$100 a ticket, *O* is scheduled to play there until 2008. With a potential box-office take of $75 million a year, it will not take long to recoup its initial $18 million production cost.

The title of the show is a pun on the French word "*eau*," since it takes place almost entirely in, on, and under water. For this purpose Bellagio has built a massive pool onstage, twenty-five feet deep, which holds more than 1.5 million gallons. When the clowns come on with their red noses and sad looks, they are holding pots, strainers, and filters, and squirting water at the audience. A woman bicycles by playing a cello on wheels. A tall emaciated compère with an enormous fright wig sails past on an inverted umbrella.

The show proper begins with about twenty pairs of feet sticking out of the water. What transpires are a number of variations on an Esther Williams aquatic ballet as it might have been choreographed by Busby Berkeley. Much of this is visually spectacular. So are the handsome sets and costumes. And the aerialists, suspended above the water by their ankles, are the most graceful such daredevils I have ever seen. But like so much in the American theater today the show is held captive by its special effects. Lacking a writer, it has no forward movement, no story, no theme, indeed no purpose other than to wow you. And it is not helped by a relentless acoustical score that functions like an endless wrapper of tuneless sound.

It is a pity to see this wonderful troupe fall victim to the surfeit and the ostentation of the new Las Vegas. But since the whole city is a show, the planned entertainments would seem to be a bit superfluous anyway. The real Las Vegas show goes on twenty-four hours a day, and what characterizes it most vividly is its geographical desperation. This Nevada city, artificially created out of the desert and therefore lacking an identity of its own, is trying to resignify itself by cloning more confident places. On my previous visit to the city, some months ago, I looked out of a window and with a start saw the New York skyline—the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, the World Trade Center, and the rest all bunched together against a background of Nevada desert. This weird *trompe-l'oeil* was the facade of a hotel called New York New York.

Another hotel called the Luxor, now under construction, has been designed in the form of the Great Pyramid of Cheops. It won't open until the engineers iron out some ventilation problems stemming from their belated realization that such structures were originally intended for human burial rather than for human pleasure. The Treasure Island Hotel, its motif inspired by the Robert Louis Stevenson novel, features an outdoor sea battle every half hour between a pirate ship and a frigate manned by His Majesty's Navy. As the vessels lurch toward each other ominously and the British cannons belch fire, tearing holes in the pirate flag and burning the masts, the manly buccaneers ("Belay my hearties!"), having been menaced by the British ("I say, are you blackguards ready to surrender?"), proceed to taunt their effete aristocratic manners, eventually letting loose a fusillade of their own that sends the English ship to the bottom.

Outside the window of my hotel room at the Mirage, an artificial volcano erupts every fifteen minutes, sending red hot lava hissing and boiling into the pools below. The hotel also features innumerable outdoor waterfalls, a dolphin park, a secret garden, and a sumptuous theater entirely devoted to the magic and animal acts of Siegfried and Roy (an idealized bust of the German duo adorns the exterior walls of the hotel). The newest hotel in town, called the Venetian and still under construction, has reproduced the entire Piazza San Marco, including a full-sized Campanile, and no doubt will soon be ferrying patrons to their rooms in gondolas. The hotel will have to compete with the other Italianate resort in town, namely Caesar's Palace, which features life-size statues of most of the Roman Emperors, and a commercial Forum that includes the most fashionable shops—all this under a cloud-covered roof that changes from day to night and back again every twenty minutes.

This distortion of time is famously typical of Las Vegas. Staying there is rather like being at one of the polar caps during a winter solstice. There is no daytime; indeed, there are precious few time-pieces in the gaming rooms of the hotels. It is hard to know whether you ought to be eating breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Outside, on the other hand, you are blinded by the merciless glare of the sun, supplemented by millions of bands of neon. So massive and so elaborate is the structure identifying a hotel—say, the vertical station in front of the Flamingo—that one could easily mistake it for the hotel itself.

Las Vegas runs a twenty-four-hour-a-

The Salamander

after Benvenuto Cellini, 1505

And there within the fire the small boy sees it,
his father having hailed him to the washroom
where, before a great blaze, he plays the viol,
motioning with his bow for the boy to hurry
as he gestures at the fire and the little creature
sporting within the core of the intensest coals.

Then the father strikes him, causing his son to howl,
though quickly he draws near to hug him and explain:
'My dear little boy, I am not striking you
for anything wrong that you have just now done,
but only that you remember the lizard you see
is a salamander, a creature never before seen
by anyone of whom we have credible information.'

Then he kisses him and gives him pieces of money.

Peter Filkins

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day marriage and divorce industry (in the Graceland Chapel, for example, you can get married by an Elvis Presley look-alike minister). It has also become the home for innumerable conventions. The weekend I was there, the city was gearing up for an international computer convention, but it was also playing host to a counter-convention sponsored by the porno movie industry, where awards were given to the best skin flicks of the year and to the most tireless actors, many of whom stood around in the nude signing autographs.

These attractions account for packed hotels and teeming streets where you almost always seem to be walking against a human tide. The mobs of international tourists, grasping their Japanese cameras, navigate with difficulty the crowded avenues of the Strip, vainly trying to cross the broad avenues separating humans from automobiles. But the "giant finned cars nose forward like fish," to borrow Robert Lowell's image in "For the Union Dead." He was writing about my own clogged American city of Boston, but he captured exactly the intrinsic quality of the new Las Vegas: "A savage servility slides by on grease." •

Two Cheers for Orientalism

By Ian Buruma

The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds by Jonathan D. Spence

(Norton, 279 pp., $27.50)

Exoticism has acquired a bad odor. Once redolent of perfumed gardens, Arab souks, Asiatic wise men, and pagodas set in lotus ponds, the word "exotic" now smacks of colonial condescension and an ignorant refusal to see common humanity in the Other. Exoticism has come to mean much the same thing as Orientalism. And Orientalism, as we all know from Edward Said, is a product of Western imperialism.

But that is hardly all we need to know. The question is whether this relationship between exoticism and imperialism is always the case. Can exoticism not also be a form of tribute to difference and diversity? And does Orientalism have to be a part of the imperialist enterprise? The matter is by no means as clear-cut as many people think. And even imperialism is not as simple as those who simply condemn it often suppose.

As an example of the kind of Orientalism bound to give offense today, consider the work of Pierre Loti, who wrote, among many other similar books, *Madame Crysanthème* (1887). The notion of camp was invented long after Loti's death, but it is the best way to describe his accounts of Japan and other Oriental lotus lands. Japanese women—one of whom, the aforesaid Madame Crysanthème, Loti took up as a companion for a while—are depicted as tittering porcelain dolls: decorative, exotic certainly, but barely human. Loti describes Meiji society as though it were a kind of Gilbert and Sullivan production, with bizarre and colorful costumes, elaborate sets, and absurd dialogues. When the magic of Japan wears off, Loti goes off in search of different sensations elsewhere, after dropping his porcelain companion, who surely cannot mind being used in this manner, since, Loti assures us, she has only a limited range of emotions. All done up in powder and rouge, Loti was quite camp himself; even Cocteau thought him a little "precious."

What Loti offered his European readers in his concoctions of fact and fiction was more a fantasy of the Orient than a description of it. He was in love with the mystery. He wanted the East to be different, and he was disappointed when its mysteries were unveiled, as though a magician had revealed his tricks or an actor had stepped out of his role. Loti was in Peking after the Boxer rebellion in 1900, when palaces and temples were looted by foreign troops. The imperial court was in tatters and the Forbidden City in a state of desolation. When he returned to France, Loti (in the words of Jonathan Spence) "mourned the lost magic of China." The Forbidden City had been, as Loti put it, "a last refuge of the unknown and the marvelous; it was one of the remaining bastions of ancient humanity, as incomprehensible to us as it was fabulous."

Here we have one of the main elements of exoticism: the idea of China, or more generally, the idea of the Orient, as not just fabulous and beyond our comprehension, but also as a place that has retained something that we have lost. This is the Arcadian view. There is also the Utopian view, which posits China as an example which might guide us on our way to a better future. The great utility of China was that it was sufficiently far away and looked sufficiently different from the West to serve as a screen on which to project all our fantasies. These could be dreams of a perfect moral order, a society governed by wise men, or a nightmare world of ant-like people and crushing tyranny.

Elements of both these fantasies still exist to this day. Indeed, until quite recently some professed to admire what was in fact a nightmare: the sinister beauty of mass mobilization and despotic order. Ezra Pound saw Confucian orthodoxy as a kind of Asiatic counterpart of Italian-style fascism. The modern flirtations with Maoism in Europe and America are well known. But whatever China is thought to be in these fantasies, it is always something that we are not.

Spence's book is a collection of literary and political *chinoiserie*, from Marco Polo, to the Jesuits, the French exotics, and the American Yellow Peril merchants, to Henry Kissinger overawed at Mao's court. The subject is not new, nor is it, after Spence, exhausted. While covering much ground lightly, he has teased out common strands in European and American ideas about China, and many of them cannot be explained by imperialism. Marco Polo, for example, described a thirteenth-century China that was richer and more advanced than his native Venice. Spence speculates that Polo's version of Cathay ruled by Mongols might have been meant as a moral counter-model to his dissolute city-state.

As the father of three daughters, Polo much admired the modesty of young Chinese women: "They do not indeed skip and dance, they do not frolic, they do not fly into a passion, they do not stick at the windows looking at the faces of passers nor showing their own faces to them, they give no hearing to unseemly talk, they do not frequent feasts or merrymakings." This is the China of superior virtue, echoed in the Maoist hallucinations of our own era. But Polo wanted it both ways. As well as describing a China of moral certainties, he wallowed in the sensual delights of Kublai Khan's harem. It was these passages concerning sexual abandon that caught the imagination of Christopher Columbus, who was particularly arrested by the report that Chinese men customarily "offer their wives and their daughters to passing trav-

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elers." This was hardly a Chinese custom, but it is typical of the overheated sensuality that infuses many European fantasies of the Orient. With such things in mind, America must have been a terrible disappointment to Columbus.

In most European accounts of China since Marco Polo, the China of superior virtue alternates (or exists side by side) with the China of outlandish sex and cruelty. During the sixteenth century, Spanish and Portuguese adventurers described a country that was governed by strict laws and fair judicial procedures. But the laws were enforced by ferocious punishments. Since torture was common practice everywhere in the West as well, these punishments must have been quite something to be so remarkable to European travelers. Galeote Pereira, a Portuguese trader, witnessed a whipping with cleft bamboo rods: "He that is to be whipped lieth groveling on the ground. Upon his thighs the hangman layeth on blows mightily with these bamboos, that the standers-by tremble at their cruelty." But punishments aside, what struck the Europeans most about Chinese society was, in the words of Mendes Pinto, the prevalence of "depravity of the unspeakable sin"—that is to say, in the words of yet another Iberian observer, "sodomy, a vice very common in the meaner sort, and nothing strange among the best." A Dominican friar named Gaspar da Cruz put this down to the fact that the benighted Chinese "had never had any who told them that it was a sin, nor an evil thing done." This, presumably, was one of the things that missionaries had come to put right.

The most famous missionary and most acute (and sympathetic) of observers was Matteo Ricci, about whom Spence has already written a book. Ricci entered China from Macao in 1583. He, too, noticed the unspeakable vices, as well as the male prostitutes, often dressed in elaborate drag; but he was a charitable priest. The Chinese, he thought, were "to be pitied rather than censured, and the deeper one finds them involved in the darkness of ignorance, the more earnest one should be in praying for their salvation." Ricci's China was more the China of superior virtue than the land of shocking vice. It enjoyed perfect social harmony, and was held together by Confucian moral orthodoxy and governance by meritorious scholar-officials. Custom and tradition were the social glue that made China, in Ricci's eyes, a model of peace and civilization.

That Orientalism, in the sense of positing the Orient as something utterly *sui generis*, is not always a justification of imperialism, and indeed can be quite the opposite, is clear from the works of German idealists of the eighteenth century such as Johann Gottfried Herder. Spence's quotations from Herder about China are negative to the point of complete contempt. But Herder himself apparently didn't see it that way. He thought that he was neutral. China, in his view, was a moribund wreck; its people had no taste or vitality; all they were good at was mimicry and childish frippery. It was no wonder that they had to be ruled by an emperor, doomed "to go through his exercise like a drill corporal." Voltaire, on the other hand, had a more positive view of a kind of Platonic state ruled by Chinese *philosophes*. The relative stagnation of China was due, in his opinion, to the excessive reverence of the Chinese for their past. (This is something we still hear, mostly from Chinese intellectuals.) And Voltaire said one more thing, which strikes a modern note: that we must not judge Chinese customs by our own, "for we carry our prejudices, and spirit of contention along with us, even to the extremities of the earth."

Herder was a true Orientalist in that he insisted that nations were different and Asiatic nations were absolutely different. He criticized the French *philosophes*, and Voltaire in particular, for not recognizing those differences sufficiently, and for imposing rationalist, universalist ideas on every nation, regardless of creed or race. (Herder was the precursor of "Asian values.") Soon, he said, with heavy sarcasm, everyone would be "just like us, good, strong, happy people," all because of European traders, missionaries, and French *philosophes*. He called it imperialism. Herder, the anti-imperialist, believed we should respect the way Oriental despots are worshipped as gods, for that is in the nature of Oriental culture, while the French philosophers of the Enlightenment argued that all men should be free. I'm not sure where that leaves Said's theory about Orientalism. I think that I detect a gap.

Neither Voltaire nor Herder had been to China, but that never stopped anyone from pontificating about the place. Indeed, as Spence shows, some of the most enduring images of China came not from China itself, but from Chinatowns, by no means the same thing. Just as the idea of the Chinese as inveterate traders, as people who only care about money, owes more to the habits and the occupations of overseas immigrants than to China itself, the fantasy of the Chinaman as sinister, inscrutable, and almost supernaturally clever is to be found in American Chinatown fiction. Dr. Fu-Manchu, a creation of the British fabulist Sax Rohmer, is a literary cousin of another evil genius of pulp fiction, the Yale-educated, Shakespeare-loving racketeer from San Francisco, Quong Lung. Perhaps it was on such Chinatown crooks that Brecht later based the Chinese gangster character in *In the Jungle of Cities*.

The premise of Yellow Peril literature (though not of Brecht's play) is that Orientals, full of perversity, unspeakable vices, devilish cunning, and so forth are scheming to bend the gullible, unsophisticated, but morally sound white folks to their wicked will. The white American victim of Quong Lung is corrupted by opium and silky sing-song girls. Dr. Fu-Manchu, too, exploits "the divine simplicity" of the white race to further his goal of yellow supremacy. The source of the Yellow Peril shifts from time to time from China to Japan and back again, all depending on the political circumstances. But as *Rising Sun*, Michael Crichton's novel about the crafty Japanese takeover of a gullible America, showed in 1993, the theme remains the same.

There is something masochistic about the Western fantasy of the evil Oriental predator, expressing a fear, or perhaps a longing, to be corrupted by a mysterious, more powerful force. The fear of sexual corruption by the voluptuous East goes back to the ancient world. Aeschylus described the Orient (by which he meant Persia) as a place whose seductive excesses undermined man's reason. Aphrodite was the Greek incarnation of Astarte, the Whore of Babylon. One of the first decrees of Constantine was to have her temple at Baalbek destroyed, to make way for a Christian church. And we know what happened to the noble Anthony after he became addicted to the love of Cleopatra.

What all the whores of Babylon have in common with Dr. Fu-Manchu (and the devil) is the power to enslave us through seduction. Devilish characters in Hollywood movies are almost always elegant, even effete, and when they are not Oriental they speak in upper-class English accents. Fu-Manchu and his Yellow Peril colleagues are anything but manly. As the victims of their seductive malevolence, we lose our masculinity and our vitality, as if stupefied by a dangerous drug.

Spence mentions the sexual element in his chapter on French exoticism. His description of the mid-nineteenth-century aesthetic is precise. The awareness of Chinese sensuality, he writes, also embraced something "harsher and ranker, something unknowable, dangerous and intoxicating, composed of scent and sweat, of waves of heat and festering night air. Separate from this, though

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inescapably linked to it, was the sense of a realm of Chinese violence and barbarism, of hidden cruelties, threats of ravishment, uncontrollable impulses." What is interesting about much Western erotic writing about the Orient, however, is the way in which masochism can turn to sadism. Loti's toying with Madame Crysanthème is in a way the opposite of the traditional fear of Asiatic corruption: it is he who wants to possess her, and her charm is her childlike innocence. The aesthetic of the geisha girl is the other side of Dr. Fu-Manchu: here the predator comes from the West.

This is where imperialism does enter the picture. For the feminine, moonlit, perfumed, decadent East seemed ripe for the plucking by a dominating, masculine, rampant West. And there was plenty of literature to express this view. Said's notion of Orientalism is amply illustrated by nineteenth-century art, mostly French, of Middle Eastern slave markets and harems, where beautiful girls await their masters' orders. But again, imperialism is not always straightforward. Consider *René Leys*, by Victor Segalen, which appeared in 1919. It is the best novel to have emerged from French exoticism. Leys is the son of a Belgian grocer. Young, intelligent, and handsome, he speaks fluent Chinese, knows his way around the Forbidden City in Peking, has friends among the Manchu princes, takes a concubine, and—the ultimate achievement—becomes the lover of the boy emperor's mother, a mysterious figure, referred to throughout the book as She or Her. Leys, in a word used constantly, in all its shades of meaning, has "penetrated" the mystery of China.

Segalen lived in Peking in 1911 and witnessed the collapse of the last imperial dynasty. His first glimpse of the Chinese world had been Chinatown in San Francisco, but Segalen, unlike Loti, became a serious student of Chinese civilization. Like Loti, though, he deplored the end, as he saw it, of the old China. (The difference between the Han Chinese people and the Manchu dynasty that had ruled them is overlooked in these lamentations.) There are many references in the book to the peculiar position held by Europeans in China. The French narrator, a person much like Segalen himself, lives in the Tatar City, "as a conqueror, but a most discreet one...." The foreigner has a great deal of license in Peking. At the theater one night, the narrator is surprised by Leys's efforts to have a man arrested. He asks: "Do you think people noticed your rather ... brisk intervention?" "Not at all, no," answers Leys. "A European can do the most extraordinary things as far as they are concerned.... Do you think a Chinese, in a public theatre, can stare at those women the way we're doing?"

"A European," the narrator says later, "can get in anywhere as long as he pays well. People accept his obligation to indulge in amorous or other intrigue." Now, one might regard this statement as typically imperialist: the European enjoying his special privileges. It is true that the erotic fantasy of ravishing the feminine East is based on the reality of domination. Perhaps that is why there are few counter-examples of Asian fantasies of doing the same to the West. I can think of only one interesting exception: the contemporary fascination of Japanese women for black men, expressed most typically in the novels of a Japanese woman writer named Yamada Emi. Yamada's semi-autobiographical descriptions of her black lovers (mostly American GIs in Japan) bring Pierre Loti to mind; her super-masculine guys—all sex and no brain—are as devoid of individual character as Loti's porcelain dolls. Like Loti, indeed like all European fantasizers about the Orient, she is in a position of superior strength. She is rich, they are poor; she is privileged, they are oppressed. She can do anything she likes as long as she pays well.

Still, to read Segalen's novel as an imperialist fiction would be as superficial as reading Yamada's books as pure expressions of Japanese superiority. It is true that Leys "penetrates" the hidden world of Peking, the palace in the Forbidden City, the concubine and the royal dowager. As the narrator tells him, in awe: "You have gone further in your penetration of China than any other European known or unknown.... You have attained the heart of the center of the Within—nay, better than the heart: the Bed!" But what is it that Leys (or his creator) seeks to penetrate, or to possess? He is not interested in the subjugation of China by force. What interests him is the erotic attraction of the Other.

The foreigners in his story are not imperial overlords or conquerors, even though their freedom to do as they like in China owes much to European power. Their license is largely based on the hermetic quality of Chinese society. Foreigners are outsiders, and thus not bound by normal rules of society. They are as mysterious to the Chinese as the Chinese are to them. This offers the liberating prospect of being able to play self-invented roles. Leys at one point appears to the narrator as an actor on the stage set called China. This is what opens up such erotic possibilities.

RICHARD REEVES

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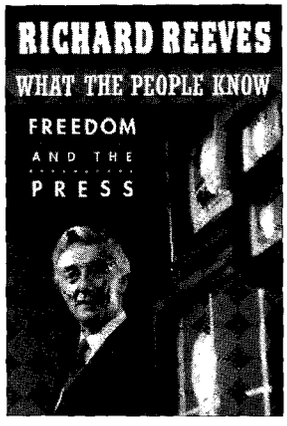

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The narrator has dinner one night with a Manchu official named Wang, and his young wife. Madame Wang is sized up by the Frenchman with an almost sadistic eye for physical detail: "Beneath the blouse, two modest breasts, precise of angle. And lastly a pair of legs that were incontrovertibly long. In fact I let my gaze linger on them the better to gauge their length." He thinks about an affair. Would she reciprocate? How far could they go? He wants "even a provisional answer to this problem: can a normal, nubile European—to be precise a Frenchman—aspire to complete possession of a young Manchu woman—likewise nubile, since she is officially married—and grace that possession with the name of 'love' (without prejudice to eventual misapplications of that word)?"

For Spence, the meaning of this passage is clear. The narrator sees China as "a boundless adventure ground, in which the Westerner from his privileged and protected post-Boxer terrain could take his ease and plan his moves at leisure." But after the revolution brings imperial China, with all its ancient majesty, crashing down, there is no more mystery, and thus the story finds its natural end. This is one way of reading the novel, and it is not necessarily wrong. Yet there is another layer to the erotic tension that gives the story its snap and crackle. The Western colonial enterprise was not simply a matter of trade or subjugation. It was also intent on gaining knowledge. It was the thirst for knowledge that produced European expansion in the first place.

Knowledge is a form of possession. This was expressed most beautifully in 1926 in a short story by the Russian author Boris Pilnyak, entitled "A Story About How Stories Come To Be Written." Pilnyak was in China a decade later than Segalen; he published a kind of literary diary of his stay in Shanghai, called *Chinese Story*, in 1927. His description of China in an advanced state of decay, smelling of corpses, opium, and cheap perfume, echoes many of the clichés of French exoticism: the debilitating heat, the cruelty, the rot. But his short story about how stories are told takes off in an entirely fresh direction.

The narrator is a Russian author. On a trip to Japan, he comes across a most remarkable document. It is an autobiographical account written by a Russian woman who had been married to a Japanese. The document, prepared for government officials, is written in simple, childish Russian. The woman from Vladivostok tells the story of her love for a polite, soft-spoken Japanese military officer, who has a deep knowledge of Russian literature. She joins him in Japan and lives a quiet life with this pensive, reticent man and his extended family. After some years she finds out that he is really a famous novelist. And his most famous novel turns out to be a minutely observed account of her. Every detail of her life, every private thought and every shudder and moan of her love-making are described. He has known her in every sense. The narrator tells us that the writer "contemplated in the Russian manner." The woman decides that she cannot live as an object for her husband's inspection any longer and asks to be sent back to Vladivostok, hence the official document. Pilnyak's story is a parable about writing, for which every writer is a cunning fox, who possesses people by trapping them in his stories. But it is also about the double act of possessing another culture through sex and knowledge.

Victor Segalen's lifelong ambition had been to write a major work on exoticism. The great book was never written. Instead he published fragmentary notes, entitled *Essai sur l'exotisme* (1908). Exoticism, in his view, is a celebration of diversity, of otherness, individual and collective. "The impenetrability of races," he writes, "is nothing else but an extension to race of the impenetrability of individuals." What applies to the other races also applies to the other sex. A man is attracted to a woman because she is different, mysterious, and he wants to know her. And the same is true the other way round. You have to be an individualist, he argues, to register the sensation of diversity. Only a strong individual can have the "sharp and immediate perception of eternal incomprehensibility."

Segalen wanted to know China, and yet he wanted it to remain unknowable. To understand other worlds, you need to penetrate their mysteries. This is what obsessed Segalen, the scholar of China, for he knew that erotic desire depended on not understanding, on keeping the mystery alive. At the end of *René Leys*, the narrator, and thus the reader, is left unsure whether the story that Leys told was in fact true. For isn't the Forbidden City, and the royal dowager's bedchamber, and China itself, finally impenetrable? Perhaps it is. Yet it is at least as likely that Segalen, who knew China better than almost any other European, pretended that it was so. He made up a mythical China. Leys was the teller of an exotic story about China's fascinating otherness; and so *René Leys*, as much as Pilnyak's short story, is a story about how stories are told. At the end of his book, Jonathan Spence finds it hard to explain why Europeans continue to be fascinated by images of China. One might as well be puzzled by man's attraction to woman. It is the mystery, that is all.

IAN BURUMA is a fellow of the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. His new book, *Anglomania*, will be published by Random House this spring.

The Cult of the Personality

BY MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM

The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault by Alexander Nehamas

(University of California Press, 283 pp., $29.95)

When students inquire about courses in philosophy, they are usually told that it is a difficult but exhilarating field, in which they will learn a great deal about the arguments of others on questions of pressing human interest and, in the process, cultivate their own powers of mind. Sometimes they are also told that what they will learn is socially valuable: theories of justice, for example, can help us improve society. What they are less likely to hear, however, is what Alexander Nehamas would like to tell them: that philosophy is an art of individual self-cultivation, through which one may eventually succeed in forging a unique and unified personality, as unforgettable as that of a major literary character.

Fascinated by such a literary conception of philosophy, Nehamas holds that it has been unjustly neglected in recent times: it plays a major role in the history of philosophy, and it offers a way of doing philosophy that is of continued value. He traces the origins of this aesthetic model of philosophy to the enig-

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matic figure of Socrates in Plato's dialogues, and then he pursues its history through chapters on three thinkers who used the example of Socrates as inspiration for their own philosophical attempts at self-fashioning: Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault.

Nehamas prefaces his study by remarking that we have altogether lost hold of the idea that philosophy is a practical discipline, capable of shaping the conduct of life. Such a practical conception of the subject can be found in ancillary fields such as medical and business ethics, but those fields are not really pursuing first-order philosophical projects; they are simply applying already established philosophical conclusions to the ancillary field, and thus they belong more to medicine and business than to philosophy. Apart from these cases, Nehamas argues, nobody thinks of philosophy as something that changes us and our lives.

This is a peculiar beginning. For we are living in a rich era of philosophy, practically conceived. Nehamas has omitted not only the philosophy of law, which surely makes first-order contributions to philosophy and can hardly be dismissed as merely application, but also the entirety of modern political philosophy, which has resolutely insisted on the practical character of its function and on the expectation that its inquiries will change people and their world. It is certainly true, though, that none of the great modern figures in the philosophy of law and politics has represented philosophy as the sort of project in which one makes oneself whole and unforgettable, in the manner of a literary character; and it is really this self-focused project, not other types of practical project within philosophy, that turns out to be the object of Nehamas's interest.

Nehamas tells us that the idea of philosophy as a form of self-fashioning, as an "art of living," dominated the pursuit of philosophy in ancient Greece. (He does not mention the prominence of such traditions in India and China.) He argues that this Greek tradition produced three types of philosophical self-fashioning. In the first type, the philosopher practices his art in public, giving arguments that all can appreciate and share. He urges all to join him in the search for truth, though he does not claim to have found truths that he can recommend to all. Nehamas finds this sort of philosophizing in the Socrates of Plato's early dialogues, who defends and pursues the "examined life," though without claiming to know any truths. This art provides universal methods but not firm conclusions.

The second type of philosophical art is found in Platonic works such as the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, in Aristotle, Kant, and most of the major thinkers of the Western philosophical tradition. Such philosophers present arguments about the best life that they commend to everyone, holding that a single form of life is best for all. (It is in this tradition, clearly, that we should place most contemporary work in political and legal philosophy, making due allowances for the advocacy of liberal pluralism by many political thinkers.) This art provides universal methods and universal conclusions.

The third type of philosophical art provides neither universal methods nor universal conclusions. Nehamas calls it "aesthetic self-fashioning." It involves the pursuit, by the philosopher, of an unusual degree of personal integration and distinctness. As Nehamas defines it, it involves no universal claims; its practitioners believe that "human life takes many forms and no single mode of life is best for all." But what all its practitioners have in common is that they "need to be unforgettable." They want philosophical argument to turn them into uniquely memorable characters, memorable not for their positions but for their personalities. Nehamas does not deny that the other two types of self-fashioning are valuable, but this is the one in which he clearly has the greatest interest.

Nehamas has already placed the historical Socrates in the first camp; but he argues that Socrates is also the hero of this last group of thinkers, who "care more about the fact that Socrates made something new out of himself, that he constituted himself as an unprecedented type of person, than about the particular type of person he became." This "aestheticist" art requires that "the whole one constructs, the self one fashions, be significantly different from all others." Thus the philosopher makes himself as unforgettable as a finely drawn character in a novel. "The task of philosophy is not to improve the culture at large but to cultivate the individual."

Why would someone be drawn to such a repellently narcissistic idea? Even if one could use one's talents to fashion a uniquely individual self, why should one do this, when one might also use those same talents to argue on behalf of policies that will help us to advance the goals of social justice or to reduce group hatred?

The appeal of this aesthetic idea, for Nehamas, has two sources. First, he appears to believe that it is ethically valuable to integrate one's personality into a

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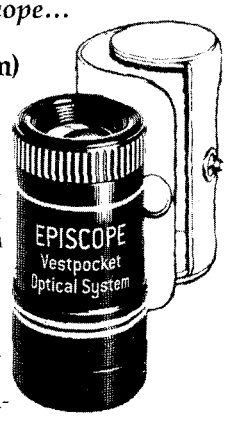

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whole, in which all elements cohere together and there are no stray pieces, no mere accidents. This idea of self-shaping, which Nehamas has already memorably developed in his earlier writing on Nietzsche, is non-universal in the sense that everyone's way of doing this will be different, given that everyone has different materials to work with; but it is universal in the limited sense that both Nehamas and Nehamas's Nietzsche think that this is something that many people, at least, will find worth doing.

And there is another, deeper source of Nehamas's aestheticism: the idea that by pursuing aesthetic self-fashioning the philosopher can survive death. This idea is introduced only briefly, but it seems very important in explaining his otherwise mysterious preference for the aestheticist project. "Another reason, which motivates all the philosophers of the art of living with whom I am concerned," Nehamas writes (having already included himself in this group), "is a fear of death.... For if death is 'dreamless sleep,' the only immortality one can hope for lies in the memory of others and in the effect on the world one can have once one has died." If we write universally, our own particularity will be extinguished; but if we somehow use philosophy to fashion ourselves into a unique figure as memorable as Socrates, we ourselves may enjoy a similar immortality. "The real fear is that the world will go on without me ... that I am not irreplaceable." The philosopher can get the better of fear only by making himself so uniquely present in his work that his difference from all others will never be forgotten.

Having described the sort of philosopher for whom he is searching, Nehamas never produces a fully convincing example. Socrates, by Nehamas's own account, is pursuing a method that he commends to all. Thus, despite the valuable analyses of Socratic irony and argument with which the book provides us, we are never given any argument for seeing Plato's Socrates (and still less for seeing the Plato who wrote the early Socratic dialogues) as a pure aestheticist. Nehamas's chapters on Socrates contain fascinating discussions of Socrates's profession of ignorance, his techniques of argument, and his personal pursuit of virtue, and they usefully analyze Plato's complicated relationship to the character that he created; but they lead us no nearer to our goal.

We expect to get closer in Nehamas's subsequent chapters, where—turning away from the many followers of Socrates, from the ancient Cynics and Stoics to the thinkers of the Enlightenment, who understood his project as a universalist search for rational living—Nehamas focuses instead on three thinkers who are alleged to see Socrates as an aestheticist, and to have followed him in this project. But even here our search for an example of pure aestheticism is frustrated.

Montaigne, it is true, draws on his own experiences and his idiosyncrasies in his philosophical writing, but he cannot be convincingly classified as an aestheticist. By Nehamas's own account, he makes philosophical use of the material of his self and his life in order to give readers an example of how one may bring one's own personality into accord with universal reason and nature. In this sense, Montaigne is best seen as heir to Hellenistic arts of self-fashioning, which stressed the need for attention to the particular, but for the sake of a universal goal.

Foucault, as Nehamas sees him, pursued aestheticist self-fashioning in his experiments with drugs and sadomasochistic sex in California. (Here he follows James Miller's controversial biography.) Yet Nehamas gives us no compelling reason to connect these personal projects with Foucault's work as a philosopher, or to see the portrait of a unique sexual (or drug-using) being emerging from the philosophical work itself. Nehamas skillfully analyzes the late lectures in which Foucault evinced a fascination with Socrates, and with ancient ideas of self-fashioning; but those lectures make no reference to Foucault's personal experiments.

Indeed, when he talks about the type of self-fashioning found in Foucault's work, Nehamas plausibly places him in his first category: as someone who assails the reigning dogmas of his age, thus exhorting readers to critical examination, though without recognizing any truths that hold good for all. "Like Nietzsche," he writes, "Foucault became what he was by openly and explicitly denouncing the greatest accomplishments of his age." If this is correct, and I think that it is, then it cannot be correct that Foucault's primary mode of self-fashioning was to be found in his experiments with drugs and sex, which he deliberately chose not to make a part of his denunciatory work. So Foucault, following Socrates, would appear to refuse the aestheticist project, though without endorsing definite truths in the manner of Nehamas's second type of self-fashioner.

Nietzsche, clearly, is Nehamas's best evidence. He has already argued in *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, which appeared in 1985, that we should see Nietzsche as the aestheticist type of self-fashioner. I have doubts about such an interpretation. Nietzsche is many-sided; but surely one of his most salient sides is his utterly unironical, thoroughly impassioned concern with the future of Europe and the fate of human excellence in Europe, and those are not exactly aesthetic matters. Nietzsche was a great thinker about the virtues.

Nehamas never seemed to me to have done justice to Nietzsche. To be sure, the strand that he picks out in Nietzsche's thought is there. And we would expect, in a book devoted to the topic of self-fashioning, that Nehamas would now show in detail how Nietzsche did in fact introduce his idiosyncrasies into his philosophical work, making himself into an unforgettable character. We would expect a close reading of *Ecce Homo*, in which Nietzsche discusses his own physical traits in close proximity to an analysis of his own self-overcoming, and of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, where he creates a character who is certainly some kind of surrogate for the author, and who has managed to become relatively unforgettable, if in a somewhat tedious way.

Yet Nehamas, for all his interest in the literary project undertaken by Nietzsche, has never been entirely at home with the literary aspects of Nietzsche. *Zarathustra* and other quasi-poetic texts are ignored in his discussion, in the previous book and in the present one. Instead of a study of Nietzsche's literary fashioning of a philosophical self, we are given a fine conventional sifting of Nietzsche's ambivalent attitude to Socrates, together with an account of the general theme of self-fashioning as it is developed in Nietzsche's non-narrative works. Thus we are left with only a glimpse of how aesthetic self-fashioning really works in a concrete case.

Nehamas's inadequate exploration of aesthetic self-fashioning is nonetheless sufficient to establish that his enterprise is deeply disturbing. Is aesthetic self-fashioning really a project that philosophers should pursue? Should they give their own uniqueness such precedence over the good that might be done for the world by a different type of philosophizing? Had Kant spent his career writing about the vicissitudes of his unique mental life (a project that he scorned), he probably would not have written works on morality and peace and respect for humanity that continue to exert a lasting influence on our culture, however vast the obstacles to their influence may be.

And even if the project of aesthetic self-fashioning is an attractive one, why should one suppose that philosophy is a field within which it can be pursued? Even if we grant that lyric poets memorialize their own idiosyncratic personalities—though it is a view of lyric voice

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that is surely naïve, and scants the many masks that a poet may assume within his or her work—why should we think that doing this is any part of the job of the philosopher? The fact that Nehamas cannot come up with a convincing example of aesthetic self-fashioning in philosophy is perhaps no accident. It may be that philosophy, like religion, is concerned with recommendations for conduct that all individuals can adapt to their lives. In this sense, philosophy may be essentially universal.

Insofar as it has a use for personal narrative, philosophy will use it in Montaigne's or Seneca's way, showing how a particular individual adapts the precepts of philosophy to a particular set of problems in a particular context. And insofar as Nietzsche did not follow Seneca's example (and this modern adept of Stoic philosophy does often follow that example in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and *Ecce Homo*), we must conclude that he veered away from his strictly philosophical projects and became a fierce polemicist, or a childish complainer, or a gifted writer.

But my objection to Nehamas's conception of philosophy goes deeper. For so far I have assumed, along with him, that the idiosyncratic, or that by which one differs from all others, is the core of the unique person, and that it is by articulating and memorializing these bits of the self that the philosopher will conquer death. But this is itself a contestable notion, presupposing a peculiarly Romantic conception of identity that is at home neither in the ancient Greek world nor, I believe, in many of our best thoughts about who we are.

Do we really think that Nietzsche's dietary habits are more revealing of who he was than his ideas about power and self-overcoming? Do we really feel that we cannot grasp who Aristotle was because we do not know anything about his dietary (or sexual) idiosyncrasies? I don't think so. For we know a great deal about what Aristotle stands for, about what he cares about and is committed to, about how his mind works. And isn't all this precisely what lies at the heart of a philosophical life?

The fact that we happen to know quite a lot more about Mill than about Aristotle means that we can write an interesting biography about Mill, and even imagine how nice it would be to go out to dinner with him. (He is one of the rare philosophers about whom a woman can make this claim.) But do we really know so much more about Mill than about Aristotle, in the sense that matters most deeply for their immortal life among us? Hardly. Mill's arguments about liberty, about sex hierarchy, and about representative government are of the essence of Mill if anything is, and we fool ourselves in a sick American way if we suppose that information about his sexual practices or the sound of his voice (a unique voice-print, say, suitable as evidence in a court of law) would show us, at last, who John Stuart Mill really was.

Indeed, we might say, following Foucault, that the notion that our public ideas are not the real self, that our real self is a congeries of mostly secret and odd qualities and habits that writing ought to bring to light, is an anomalous view about the self, arising from our culture's strange combination of Romanticism and Puritanism, of anti-intellectualism and prurience. Philosophers, more than others, should resist this pathology, and insist that someone's ideas about justice, or poverty, or peace do indeed disclose a self, and a self that is much more importantly personal—especially in a philosopher—than anything idiosyncratic and "unique" that the person happened to do. Kant walking around in Königsberg—who is that person but a boring walker? But Kant writing about the kingdom of ends is a unique individual worth caring about. That Kant is *Kant*.

Indeed, if we care at all about Kant walking around Königsberg, it is only because it was this same walker who invented the concept of the kingdom of ends. Being an unforgettable individual, in philosophy and in politics and in art, is a condition that one may achieve only by being very good at something else. The person who aims directly at being unique and unforgettable will at most achieve eccentricity, a trivial sort of memorability. It is by standing for something fine, by thinking or doing something fine, that you gain the stature for which your manner of walking or talking becomes interesting to others. In philosophy, it is by writing good and interesting philosophy that one gets to be remembered; and then it may happen that people will take an interest in what you wrote to your lover, or what you ate for dinner. And even then, those are the obsessions of the biographer, and do not really lead closer to the intellectual achievement.

What, then, are we to make of the rare figures who do lure people into philosophy by the power of their personality? For Nehamas is on to something, and he is right to associate this question with the disturbing power of Socrates's personality. This question must be clearly distinguished from the question of narrative and drama in philosophy. Many philosophers have pur-

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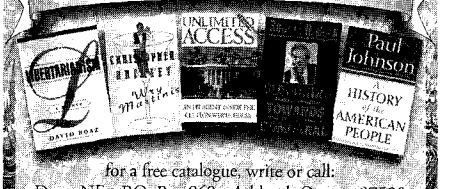

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sued philosophy by making us see parts of the world, including its people, more distinctly; and often, as in the cases of Plato and Rousseau, this dramaturgical ability is a major part of the way in which arguments and ideas make their way into the reader's mind. Sometimes philosophers writing in the narrative mode invent surrogates for themselves as vehicles for the narrative aspect of a philosophical argument: say, Lucretius, Seneca, Rousseau.

Still, if we believe that these writings have given us access to the unique individual behind the narrative personae that they present, then we are reading naïvely. None of this is "aesthetic self-fashioning" in Nehamas's sense, because its aim is not to make the author unforgettable, but to make the reader understand something. Nehamas has a different interest. He focuses on the philosopher who uses philosophy to immortalize his or her own unique self, without concern for generally communicable truths; uniqueness and idiosyncrasy are cultivated for their own sake.

Of course, the Platonic Socrates is not a real-life example of self-fashioning at all; he is a literary construct devised by Plato, whose relation to the real Socrates will always remain obscure. Even this literary invention, moreover, was not engaged entirely in aesthetic self-fashioning, as Nehamas grants. He was teaching, without irony and without vanity, the virtues of the examined life. Could it be otherwise, in any thinker worth attending to?

Still, let us try to evaluate Nehamas's idea of Socrates as best we can, by thinking of Socrates (as we often do) as a historical person who made himself into the sort of person Plato depicts. And let us focus on the aspect of his self-fashioning that does cultivate uniqueness and strangeness as objects of fascination in their own right. Alcibiades said that Socrates was indeed unlike anyone else before or since, and to this he owed a large part of his influence. So what are we to make of a philosopher who does seem to have inspired fascination for his strangeness, his unlikeness to anyone else?

Students today still get hooked by this strange ironic figure, in something of the way in which they get hooked by the figure of Gandhi, certainly another case of philosophical self-fashioning, albeit in a different philosophical tradition. In both cases, what fascinates is not independent of the substance of their convictions: in the case of Socrates, his love of reason, his willingness to die for this argument, his conviction that virtue is worth infinitely more than honor or comfort; in the case of Gandhi, the unsurpassed dedication to ideals of justice and equality, pursued through nonviolent struggle. Nehamas's point is that the fascination goes beyond the substance of their thought to touch on qualities that make them uncommon and extraordinary as persons: in both cases, an awe-inspiring detachment from custom, money, comfort, and bodily desire; in both cases, bodies deliberately fashioned to strike the observer as unlike anyone else's body—Socrates's Silenus face, Gandhi's naked wraithlike torso holding a walking stick. The bodily image of each man, and his idiosyncratic ways of talking and walking, haunt the devotee in ways that keep them alive as whole human beings in the middle of their philosophy.

So these men are immortal in a way that Aristotle is not immortal. Is this uniqueness, and its memorialization, a philosophical achievement that we should value? Our answer to this question should be profoundly ambivalent. Yes, the extra-philosophical achievement is valuable insofar as it turns people toward good things that they might never have considered. Teaching Plato's early dialogues, as every teacher of philosophy knows, is still just about the best way to get students of all sorts excited about doing philosophy. (By contrast, Aristotle is tame stuff, merely philosophical argument going about its business.)

Still, there is something unpleasant about this manipulative use of the extraordinary personality. Consider what becomes of the converts that such figures make. There are three possible outcomes. They get to work on ideas of their own, in which case they do not need their teachers; or they remain erotically focused on the idiosyncratic personalities of their teachers, in which case they never get to the point of having ideas of their own; or they come to believe that the goal of pursuing philosophy is to make oneself into a fascinating person, unique in something like the way that Socrates and Gandhi were each unique.

The first alternative is to be desired in students who go on in philosophy: after a while the uniqueness of Socrates loses its grip, and they simply love the pursuit of the ideas. The second alternative is a common form of spiritual death. Plato warned against it, I think, when, in the *Symposium*, he portrayed Socrates's pupils sitting around telling stories about Socrates, rather than examining themselves and searching for their own truth. Perhaps Plato's gradual effacement of the idiosyncrasy of Socrates is his deepest tribute to the philosophical influence of his teacher at its best: he shows that Socrates enabled at least some pupils to get over Socrates's personality and to write works, such as the *Republic* and the *Sophist*, that owe nothing of their power to mere quirks or oddities.

As for Gandhi, he had many passive acolytes who thought that following his philosophy was the same as sitting at the feet of a guru, a conflation of thought and discipleship common enough in the Hindu philosophical tradition, but also repudiated sharply within it. This encouragement of acolytes made Gandhi a far more dangerous political thinker than the boringly human and much less fascinating Nehru, who merely made arguments and demanded rational analysis. Since my own view is that Nehru's precepts were in most respects extremely wise and that Gandhi's precepts contained a good deal that was bizarre and some bits that were even detestable, I cannot help thinking that it is not very salutary to make people venerate you in such a way that they are unwilling to tell you when you have said something silly. Charisma is rarely a virtue in politics; it is never a virtue in philosophy.

Indeed, one of the things on which the Anglo-American tradition of philosophy can most justly pride itself is its reluctance to encourage discipleship, or the (inevitably hierarchical) cult of the unique individual. It isn't that this cult is totally unknown in our philosophical culture. We do see cases in which the claim of unique genius is used to manipulate others into deference and service, or even into exemption from the usual codes of moral and professional conduct. But these are ugly exceptions, widely condemned. Unlike France (until very recently) and some parts of Germany (those precincts in which Heidegger still reigns), we have sought a philosophical community that is a democratic community of argument, in which John Rawls will get exactly the same time to speak as anyone else in the room, and will get grilled just as relentlessly; a community in which the mantle of genius offers no excuse for irresponsibility or arrogance. (In fact, it would not be wrong to see the unremarkable public persona of John Rawls as a deliberate repudiation of the cult of the great man.)

Of course, the philosophical repudiation of discipleship breeds its own type of discipleship. People, and students especially, are all too prone to humble themselves before the great, and even reticence finds its acolytes. But those who insist on sitting at the feet of thinkers such as John Rawls or W.V.O. Quine have nothing to do and no excuse to be there if they do not argue with their arguments. There is no other joy to be had in

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their vicinity, and that is as it should be. In this sense Wittgenstein is a deeply suspect figure in the tradition, and belongs more to German philosophical culture than to Anglo-American philosophical culture.

Nehamas belongs firmly, in his practice of philosophy, to the democratic tradition that I have described. He is obviously a decent person who doesn't give himself airs, and who treats students and colleagues in a respectful and thoroughly egalitarian fashion. And so his book makes the reader wonder why he should regret such virtues, as he seems to. For *The Art of Living* clearly exemplifies the third possible reaction to philosophical teachers who are personally unique: Nehamas clearly believes that the whole point of philosophy is to make oneself personally unique. He announces repeatedly that his project is a deeply personal one, and that the book itself constitutes his form of aesthetic self-fashioning. "My own interest has turned from the study of the art of living to its practice; or, rather, I have come to realize that to study the art of living is to engage in one of its forms."

Now, imitation of the masters is obviously more attractive than submission to them, and it is compatible with doing good philosophy, as discipleship is not. But it does have its unpleasant side, and we usually prefer thinkers (and colleagues and students) who do not pursue philosophy in this way. So why does Nehamas want to be a less virtuous person than he plainly is? Indeed, Nehamas does not appear in his own book, at least not in a way that brings uniqueness and idiosyncrasy to light. We learn from a casual remark that he likes being married and having children; but even in our era this is hardly sufficient to distinguish him from all other human beings. We do not even discern a unique literary style: Nehamas writes clear, conventional scholarly prose.

The truth is, I don't miss the oddities. Nehamas is a fine scholar who has lots to say about the various figures whom he discusses. In *Virtues of Authenticity*, a volume of philosophical articles that has just been published by Princeton University Press, we see him at his true best, dissecting texts and arguments, making issues come alive through the play of a learned and dexterous mind. What of Nehamas do we really lose when we read his fine scholarship and do not come away with an inkling of his nose, or his dental record, or his gait, or his humor? Anything that is relevant to his philosophical worth is already there, in the arguments on the page. We are lucky that Nehamas does not really practice what he preaches, that he has not abandoned traditional scholarship and philosophy for an intellectual's dandyism. We can therefore learn from his work and admire it without subordinating our personalities to his. And the frustration of our hunger for gossip may fuel our pursuit of truth.

MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM's new book, *Sex and Social Justice*, will be published by Oxford University Press in December.

The Limits of Fun

BY CHRISTOPHER BENFEY

The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets by David Lehman

(Doubleday, 433 pp., $27.50)

The name "New York School of poets" was originally a marketing term, coined in 1961 by John Bernard Myers, the director of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, to link several art-inclined poets, especially John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, and Kenneth Koch, with their more famous painter contemporaries and associates. "The idea," as Ashbery dryly remarked, "was that, since everybody was talking about the New York School of painting, if he created a New York School of poets then they would automatically be considered important."

One advantage of the label was that it asserted a merely geographical common ground between these poets and "New York School" painters such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Painters and poets might share what David Lehman calls "New York's metropolitan energy and sass" even if some of the poets, particularly Ashbery, spent little time in New York as the "school" was taking form. Yet nobody was claiming any specific technical or aesthetic parallels, or implying that these poets were "Abstract Expressionist" poets, or "Action" poets, or "drip" poets.

Lehman's book is a genial and boosterish account of "the making of" the New York School of poets, from roughly 1948 to 1966. For Lehman, it is a highly exclusive "school" indeed. He admits only four poets: Ashbery, O'Hara, Koch (Harvard graduates all), and James Schuyler. He expels three pretenders: the dance critic Edwin Denby, "an underrated poet whose marvelous metropolitan sonnets O'Hara championed," Barbara Guest, and Harry Mathews. "It is no slur on these writers to observe that they do not seem nearly as central to the New York School in the 1950s as the quartet I have chosen to emphasize."

Here and there Lehman allows himself to reflect in passing on two questions that contemporary professors would want more fully treated. Why were there so few women involved in this "school"? And why were three of the four poets—all but Koch—gay? Lehman has two quick answers. First, he notes that the subsequent generation of New York School poets had plenty of women: an irrelevant observation, surely. Second, he suggests that these four poets deserve credit for not being typical macho artists: "Masculine the poets were, but they deviated boldly from the prevailing idea of masculinity." While noting Ashbery's reticence about his homosexuality and Schuyler's outspokenness, Lehman confides that he "would not want to overemphasize their homosexuality as an element of their aesthetic practice." He is more interested in other aspects of their work.

Lehman invokes Roger Shattuck's interdisciplinary account of the cultural brew of pre-World War I Paris, *The Banquet Years*, as a parallel to his own subject. "Substitute Frank O'Hara for Apollinaire and Abstract Expressionism for Cubism," he writes, "and you get an eerie fit." Yet Lehman's book is considerably less than the deep cultural history that it pretends to be. It affords only glancing attention to art, less to music, and no attention at all (a casualty of the Denby exclusion) to dance. Artists move through these pages as biographical figures—as hosts of parties, as drinking buddies, as lovers—but there is no sustained attention to their work. Lehman does mention collaborations between the New York School poets and various artists—a play by Kenneth Koch with sets by Alex Katz, for example—but he doesn't describe the sets or illustrations.

The Last Avant-Garde consists mainly of four accessible essays—one on each of

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the four poets—that mix informed biography with careful literary analysis. Framing the four essays are introductory scene-setting chapters on New York circa 1950 and a shaky closing discussion of how O'Hara and Co. were "avant-garde"—a term taken by Lehman to denote a small group of artists who are original, committed to the new, adversarial, out to shock the establishment. Its more extreme claims notwithstanding, this book is easily the best available introduction to these four poets, who are too often written about by indignant, but-is-it-poetry? detractors or by equally vehement partisans.

JOHN ASHBERY, FRANK O'HARA, JAMES SCHUYLER, KENNETH KOCH
BY DAVID SCHORR FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Lehman's book is mainly a work of literary history. It is also part polemic and part memoir. The word "last" in the title is added for polemical effect, expressing Lehman's disappointment in competing avant-garde movements such as the Beats, and in poetry movements such as the "Language poets" that came later. (Lehman, series editor of the annual anthology *The Best American Poetry* and a clever poet himself, has probably read as much recent American poetry as just about anyone else.) And this book records also Lehman's own conversion, under the tutelage of his Columbia professor Koch, to the tenets of the New York School. Conversion is not too strong a word. Running through the whole book is a view of the dire predicament of American poetry after World War II, and Lehman's sense of having seen the light cast by "the band of outsiders who brought the avant-garde revolution to American poetry."

Poetry was born free, and was everywhere in chains. That is Lehman's assessment, more or less, as he surveys the American poetry scene in the early 1950s. It was "an age of split-level conformism," he writes, sounding a bit like a PBS voice-over, "a decade notable for kitsch, consumerism, and the herd mentality." "The silent generation was in control," he notes later. "The most exotic food to reach New York was the pizza pie. Everyone looked alike and dressed alike."

English departments were likewise drab and regimented, according to Lehman. It was "the era of the New Criticism, when the canon of poetry as defined by T.S. Eliot was in place and poets were taught to regard a poem as a verbal icon, a taut web of tensions in balance." Working stiffs such as Robert Lowell—Lehman's main whipping boy—produced poems that were "dripping with perspiration," in which the poetic idiom was "worn out, the syntax clotted, the diction artificially inflated."

Never mind that the New Critics—whom Lehman never names as individuals—were themselves in the business of liberation, freeing poetry as they saw it from the dead weight of history. Like many contemporary critics, Lehman settles for an easy caricature of these diverse critical minds as jailers of poetic spontaneity and fun, even as he himself relies on their ideas. "Ashbery's poems," he claims, "defeat the analytic methods of the New Criticism. Like mysterious equations in which the terms take on multiple values, they cannot be easily reduced to syllogisms." But it was precisely the New Critics who railed against what Cleanth Brooks called the "heresy of paraphrase"; and those "multiple values" are precisely what William Empson had in mind in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.

Yet an avant-garde requires an arrière-garde, and so Lehman insists on his view of the 1950s as a period inimical to poetry. Who, then, would rescue poetry from this enchainment, this evil New Critical enchantment? Three recent Harvard graduates and a fourth who could pass for an Ivy Leaguer—the "Fourth Musketeer," Lehman calls Schuyler—arrived in New York almost simultaneously. As Lehman tells it, they slipped in like spies in disguise. "The New York poets may have looked like everyone else, clean cut in sweaters and khaki trousers. In this they were unlike the bewhiskered Beats, who brought sunglasses and pot and Zen Buddhism and bongo drums into the living room." Despite appearances, the bongo-less New York poets were in Lehman's view the true liberators: "They were leaders not in social attitude but in artistic innovation. It was in their poetry that they conducted their rebellion and overthrew the prevailing gods." Who were those gods? Lehman is vague. He lines up an array of straw men and triumphantly topples them. "Koch's experimentalism counters the establishment view that poems arise out of experience and express irreproachable sentiments in an earnest manner." It sounds good, but who exactly is "the establishment" whose "view" this is? The editor of *Seventeen*, perhaps? Throughout the book, and especially in his discussion of Koch, Lehman gestures angrily toward "academia" and "academic America" as the enemies of the spontaneity and the fun championed by the New York poets. He wonders why the critics have neglected Koch's poetry. "Because," he answers, "Koch is a comic and narrative poet, and in academic America the bias against humor in poetry is matched only by the bias in favor of the short, sincere, autobiographical anecdote." This sounds fishy. Again, who exactly is "academic America"? The writing workshops? The New Critics?

Lehman gives an example of Koch's "power to make the reader laugh out

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loud," in which, he says, "the repetition is the masterstroke":

> The only thing that I could say in Swedish
> Was "Yog talar endast svenska"
> Which meant I speak only Swedish,
> whereas I thought it meant
> I DON'T speak Swedish.
> So the young ladies, delighted,
> talked to me very fast
> At which I smiled and understood nothing,
> Though sometimes I would repeat
> Yog talar endast svenska.

If you don't find that hilarious, then you are part of academic America, and you don't realize how "the fun and games in Koch's poetry play their part in smashing 'the verbal icon' and 'the well-wrought urn'" and "the values of T.S. Eliot."

Lehman sees Koch as a sort of hero of hilarity, a poet who "took a terrible risk in making his poems unabashedly funny." Yet there were other funny poets during this period. Was John Berryman taking a "terrible risk" with such Dream Songs as the famous "Life, friends, is boring..."? And what of the funny poems by such poets as X.J. Kennedy or Howard Nemerov? It may be that Koch's comedy is fundamentally different from these poets, but Lehman should specify how. Here as elsewhere Lehman seems to have projected into the 1950s his animus against what he sees as the current solemn conventions of poetry workshops and creative writing programs.

Lehman wants to persuade us that Koch is anti-didactic and anti-academic and committed to "the liberation of poetry from the didactic realm of [quoting Koch] 'the men with their eyes on the myth/And the Missus and the midterms.'" But surely nobody is more didactic than Koch, whom Ashbery aptly nicknamed "Doctor Fun." Koch, an English professor with a Ph.D., has spent his career teaching poetry at Columbia. No teacher is more seductive than one who advertises himself as the professor of fun and desire locked in battle with the professors of duty and death. For Lehman, Koch "used his vivacious pedagogical methods to convert a generation of Columbia undergraduates into sorcerers' apprentices," and one of those apprentices was Lehman. "I took Koch's writing course in my sophomore year. It was the only writing course I ever took, and it changed my life. Unlike the standard-issue creative writing workshops, class time was not devoted to the analysis of students' work." There's the straw man again: "standard-issue." How does Lehman know, if he took only Koch's course?

In his effort to persuade his readers that the New York poets were resolutely "avant-garde"—borrowing the painter Fairfield Porter's three avant-garde precepts of the autonomy of art, the "organic use of accident," and being "playful about work"—Lehman stresses certain aspects of their poetic practice. Two of these, collaboration and the poetic joke or *blague*, take up a lot of space in Lehman's analysis. I'm not sure that they enhance the standing of his heroes. Lehman quotes Koch as saying that the whole period was "fizzy with collaboration"; and it is certainly true that some of their group projects, such as Schuyler and Ashbery's deliberately banal novel *A Nest of Ninnies*, retain a peculiar charm. Lehman quotes the following passage:

> "In the fall," Mrs. Turpin said, her voice rising excitedly, "when the chestnuts are ripe, hogs are driven up the hills. With sticks, by boys. Later they are driven down again."
> Though the others waited, this was the end of her tale.

But most of the collaborative efforts that Lehman recounts with glee are merely depressing. One day, for example, Koch and O'Hara created a poem on a midtown street corner. It consisted of the stanza—

> Sky
> Woof woof!
> harp

—repeated a dozen times. (Why a dozen?)

And after a game of pinball in Paris, Koch and Ashbery wrote "Gottlieb's Rainbow," in which each line "contains the words *bonus* and *bumper*, a color, a season, and the name of a philosopher," as in "The red winter ball hit the Plato bonus bumper/Whose indigo bonus killed the spring Bertrand Russell bumper...." Such tired games show less the vitality and the unquenchable wit of these poets than how exclusive and in-groupy they were, how selective in their souls' society, how certain that they alone were hip. Lehman concedes as much without condemning it: "It was the pleasure of being in on the secret, among the select, in the know, ahead of the game: the pleasure of being avant-garde."

Lehman wants to claim for these four poets a Promethean rebellion comparable to the revolution in art brought about by the Abstract Expressionists. "Just as the Abstract Expressionists liberated painting from the tyranny of subject matter, so the New York poets were intent on freeing their work from the burdens of a political consciousness." Lehman writes well about Ashbery's resistance to politically "engaged" poetry, his view that any art that takes a definite position has relinquished its subversive force. Yet Lehman's "just as ... so" formulation obscures the queasiness of this parallel, one of many attempts on Lehman's part to align the two movements.

Lehman must also wrestle with the "paradox," as he calls it, that the painters to whom these poets were closest in temperament were not the abstractionist deities Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline and Mark Rothko. O'Hara worked as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, and arranged exhibits of the painters and wrote about them; and Ashbery supported himself for twenty years by writing art reviews for *Newsweek* and other journals. But the painters these poets hung out with and collaborated with were the second-generation New York School painters—"slightly rumpled realists" (Ashbery's term) such as Jane Freilicher, Larry Rivers, and Grace Hartigan, all of whom re-embraced "subject matter."

Actually, this isn't so much a paradox as a disjunction, and of a familiar kind in cultural history. The various arts develop at different rhythms and rates, and only rarely are they solving similar problems ("the tyranny of subject matter," "the burdens of a political consciousness") at the same time and in the same place. The Abstract Expressionists did indeed banish one kind of subject matter from their canvases, but that doesn't mean that one is likely to find kindred banishments in the poetry or music or architecture of the same period.

In fact, the kind of heroic gestures that Lehman so admires occurred one or two generations earlier in American poetry. No poem of Ashbery's "stretches the relation between language and communi-

The first Christians effaced the historical Jesus, mythicizing him and doctoring his teachings through writing, selecting, editing, and finally canonizing a sacred literature; critical New Testament study confirms this. But now, maybe, the historical Jesus is recoverable by means of the *Thomas* document unearthed in 1945, which claims to be enigmatic sayings of Jesus jotted down by a disciple journeying with Jesus. This claim is validated by Jack Hannah in ***You Will Not Taste Death—Jesus and Epicureanism*** through fitting the sayings chronologically with the historical framework of Mark's Gospel. Hannah then analyzes all 113 sayings: showing them to be free of early Christian contrivances, developing a new historical narrative, and demonstrating that in fact Jesus was oriented toward Epicureanism—the most materialistic, scientific, and anti-superstitious of all Hellenistic philosophies. The historical Jesus had a more realistic ontology and ethic than what his successors devised. Hannah's findings challenge the academic presupposition that Jesus taught within the theistic and messianic bounds of Judaism. This seminal, radical, 321pp.pbk. is $12 postpd. Order from:
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cation" as far as Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, which appeared in 1914. No line-breaks in the poems of O'Hara or Schuyler—also much admired by Lehman—could be any more radical than those of William Carlos Williams. The enthusiastic embrace of the sights and sounds of the city—"metropolitan energy and sass"—was already there in Whitman, and again in Hart Crane. Koch, according to Lehman, "initiated ... the list or catalogue poem," but later Lehman has to concede that it was Whitman who initiated this genre.

Lehman's twin emphases on collaboration (which goes along with the idea of a "school" of poetry) and innovative rebellion (which confirms the status of an "avant-garde") lead him to misconceive the real achievements of this group of poets. He is most attentive to the goofy collaborative jokes, the "fun and games," the in-your-face inanities that socked it to those dreary dons of the 1950s. Page after page is taken up with these shenanigans. Similarly, he is constantly claiming innovations for these poets that were already a generation or two old when they adopted them. But in truth these four poets often wrote best and most enjoyably when they were most traditional and least "funny."

Lehman lines up his usual straw men to disapprove of O'Hara's great elegy for Billie Holiday, "The Day Lady Died." The poem details O'Hara's hurried Friday afternoon errands and gift-buying before heading for a dinner party in the Hamptons. After twenty lines of jagged Midtown stops at greasy spoons and book stores ("and have a hamburger and a malted and buy/an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets/in Ghana are doing these days"), there is this:

> then I go back to where I came from to 6th Avenue
> and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and
> casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
> of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it
>
> and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
> leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
> while she whispered a song along the key-board
> to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing

Critics, Lehman writes, "wondered whether a poem that doesn't get around to mentioning the deceased until four lines from the end, and then in the most incidental way, could possibly be a sincere expression of grief." Which critics? Noting that the poem is "thoroughly traditional" as an elegy for a fellow artist (comparable in this regard to Milton's "Lycidas" or Shelley's "Adonais"), Warner Berthoff has called this poem "very nearly the surest American anthology selection of the past thirty years." Other critics, most prominently James E.B. Breslin, have followed suit.

Ashbery discovered early on that horsing around with nonsense poetry and verbal collage—in poems from *The Tennis-Court Oath*—could give you the reputation of an experimental poet, but it was not very rewarding as poetry. His most compelling poems, such as "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," are as mindful of tradition as O'Hara's elegies. A complex example of *ekphrasis*, or a poem arising from the poet's encounter with a work of art, "Self-Portrait" is, among other things, a superb commentary on Parmigianino's bizarre self-portrait ("the right hand/Bigger than the head ... as though to protect/What it advertises") written by an experienced art critic, a meditation on the whole subject of self-portraiture, and a self-portrait of the poet himself.

The poet least well served by Lehman's attention to shocks and pranks is James Schuyler—poem for poem, my favorite among these four poets. Born in Chicago in 1923, and raised in East Aurora, New York—a suburb of Buffalo known for Elbert Hubbard's Arts and Crafts Roycrofters community—Schuyler attended Bethany College in West Virginia. "Nah, you're Harvard," the painter Alex Katz once insisted. "Wish I / were," wrote Schuyler, "but I'm a lot more panhandle than I am Cambridge, / Mass."

As a young man, Schuyler made his way into Auden's circle in Greece, becoming particularly close to Auden's companion Chester Kallman. His life as a poet began with his rejection of Auden's tight poetic forms, and his adoption (shades of Elbert Hubbard) of a rough-hewn American vernacular of slang, unexpected line-breaks, and intense visual effects. Schuyler's poems, wistful and melancholic, record his periodic mental breakdowns with a pitiless curiosity not unlike Lowell's.

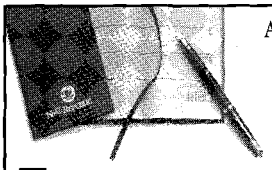
More than the other three poets, Schuyler internalized the lessons of the painters whom he admired, especially what he called "the pure pleasure of/ Simply looking." He lived for prolonged periods in Fairfield Porter's house. ("He came to lunch one day and stayed for eleven years," Porter's wife quipped.) Porter's attention to "things as they are"—the accidental placement of plates and flowers on a table, the view out the window—became Schuyler's subject as well. A poem such as the beautiful "Korean Mums" simply records what was there—"Korean mums//beside me in this garden/are huge and daisy-like ... shrubby and thick-stalked,/the leaves pointing up/the stems from which/the flowers burst in/sunbursts"—and what happened that morning when a dog killed a barn owl:

> Now the bird
> lies buried by an apple
> tree. Last evening
> from the table we saw
> the owl, huge in the dusk,
> circling the field
> on owl-silent wings.
> The first one ever seen
> here: now it's gone,
> a dream you just remember.

Schuyler returns to describing the garden, but he can't get the owl out of his mind:

> Light on leaves,
> so much to see, and
> all I really see is that
> owl, its bulk troubling
> the twilight. I'll
> soon forget it: what
> have I not forgot?
> Or one day will forget:
> this garden, the breeze
> in stillness, even
> the words, Korean mums.

By poem's end the name of the flower has earned its "stillness"—it is keeping "mum"—as well as its exotic otherness.



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This poem too, as Lehman notes, is quite traditional; and he is good on the various understated allusions in the poem—"the unembellished 'apple core' is sufficient to suggest the mythic dimensions of another lost garden paradise." Still, it is hard to see what is "avant-garde" about the poem. In fifty years, when the makeshift schools and movements of this century are sifted, Schuyler and Lowell (Lehman's prime example of an "academic poet") will come to seem close in style and temperament. Confessional poets charting the rise and fall of their manic-depressive journeys through adulthood, they both found in the jagged and speech-inflected lines of Williams a way to free themselves from the iambic straitjacket of Tate and Auden.

What the New York School poets had to struggle with was less the stifling 1950s cultural establishment Lehman describes than a sense of what Harold Bloom calls "belatedness." It is true, as Ashbery has claimed, that there wasn't much experimental poetry being written in 1950. But this was not (as Lehman argues) the fault of Eisenhower and his era of conformism. It was, rather, a reaction to the sheer volume of extraordinary experimental stuff—by Eliot, Pound, Marianne Moore, Gertrude Stein, Williams, Hart Crane, e.e. cummings, Robert Frost, and so on—that had come immediately before. This is one meaning, I think, of Ashbery's lines in "Soonest Mended":

> *They* were the players, and we who had struggled at the game
> Were merely spectators, though subject to its vicissitudes.

There are at least two ways to respond to overwhelming achievement in the previous generation. One is to try to take those achievements even further. This was Ashbery's route at the start of his career, and O'Hara's too, in his attempts to ape the free strokes of the painters whom he worshipped. Another response is to ironize and to satirize those earlier achievements. That is Koch's approach, especially in his masterly parodies of Pound, Williams, and Frost. And Schuyler's response was like Fairfield Porter's quiet insistence that one could paint figural paintings in an age of abstraction, that the challenges of art are perennial, not progressive.

There is an interesting passage about Jackson Pollock in one of Ashbery's art pieces entitled "The Invisible Avant-Garde." Ashbery is describing what it felt like to be avant-garde, to be writing experimental verse, in 1950, when "there was no sure proof of the existence of the avant-garde." And he is put in mind of Pollock.

> A painter like Pollock for instance was gambling everything on the fact that he was the greatest painter in America, for if he wasn't, he was nothing, and the drips would turn out to be random splashes from the brush of a careless housepainter. It must often have occurred to Pollock that there was just a possibility that he wasn't an artist at all, that he had spent his life "toiling up the wrong road to art" as Flaubert said of Zola.

I think Ashbery is recounting a doubt that he has felt from time to time in his own poetry. For Ashbery and Schuyler and the others, an idea of the avant-garde, as they saw it supremely in Pollock, was always there, right in their faces, so to speak. It is there in the image of Baudelaire's skull, which recurs in Schuyler's long poem "The Morning of the Poem," and "stands for strength and fierceness, the dedication of the artist." These four poets knew all about the heroic gestures of the avant-garde artist: they knew about them, and often refused them. They found their own rumpled alternative, friendly and wry, and wrote some of the freshest and most enduring poems of their time.

CHRISTOPHER BENFEY teaches literature at Mount Holyoke College.

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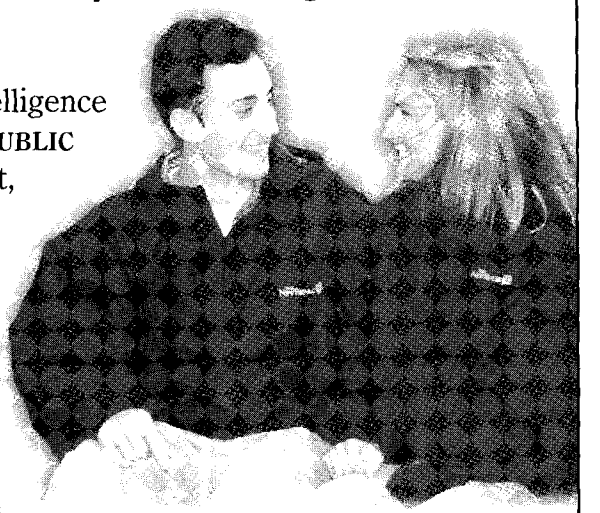

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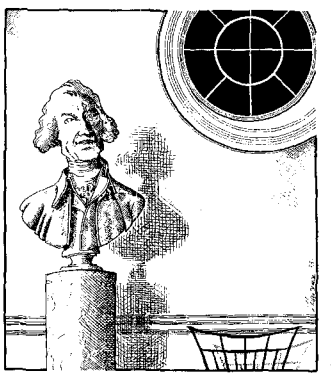
LONDON DIARIST

Lords and lard

THE EXQUISITE TORTURE OF THE book tour is often commented upon but rarely adequately expressed. I write this on the last airplane flight of the entire ordeal, over a dozen cities under my tightening belt (for some reason, I lose weight on these trips), scores of interviews and book signings fast shrinking in my depleted memory banks. What makes the torture exquisite is that one is rightly forbidden to complain to anyone. Most authors, after all, would kill to have such a commercial expedition laid on at great and dubious expense by their publishers, and most nonauthors fail to see why it is such a pain in the posterior to be sent around the country and the world, put up in chic hotels, and asked mainly flattering questions about one's oeuvre on local radio. Worse, you see their point. It's an egomaniac's dream all right. If only one could feed one's ego without getting up every day at five o'clock in the morning, jabbering incessantly till one is hoarse all day, and spending half one's life in airports. After two months or so in this media netherworld, you get desperate to leave the public ego for a few quiet moments of private id. Suddenly it becomes far more obvious how that Monica thing happened in the first place.

STILL, THERE ARE WORSE PLACES to end up in than London. It's been more than 14 years since I left for good, and I arrived to find old friends all over the headlines. As TNR readers may recall, I was a college friend of the new Tory leader, William Hague, and my trip to Britain coincided with by far the worst week of his career. (I should stay away more often.) William was the unhappy man who inherited what was left of the Conservative Party after last year's New Labour rout. Prematurely bald at 37, he looks both far too young and far too old to be anything very convincing, and, for all his intelligence and decency, he has yet to make any favorable impression on the British public. The Tories are still a staggering 26 points behind Labour in the opinion polls, and Tony Blair's masterful vacuity shows no sign of faltering. Cartoonists routinely portray William in schoolboy shorts with an enormous cranium, which is better, I suppose, than rendering him as Monty Python's "dead parrot," as the incorrigible tabloid *The Sun* did a few months ago.

STILL, HAGUE'S PROBLEMS ARE not merely the cartoonists and the government. Like his Republican equivalents in Washington, his worst enemies lie in his own party. His latest foe is Robert Cecil, a.k.a. Lord Cranborne, the Conservative Party leader in the House of Lords. Cranborne is descended from the Cecil family, whose lineage in government service goes right back to Lord Burghley in the reign of Elizabeth I. The motto of the family is "*Sero Sed Serio*," which might be roughly translated as "Late But Deadly." Burghley was famous for eventually executing Mary, Queen of Scots, without getting Elizabeth I's explicit permission (plausible deniability has a long history). His 1990s descendant, Cranborne, likewise went behind Hague's back and did a deal with Tony Blair on reform of the House of Lords. Cranborne agreed to give the government a cushy time on the rest of its legislation in the Lords as long as 91 of more than 700 peers were given a temporary reprieve from abolition (Cranborne was included, natch, among the 91). Blair readily signed on, waiting for another Thanksgiving to murder all the aristocratic turkeys. Hague, meanwhile, was left completely in the dark about the deal and thus was reduced to finding out about it on live television at Prime Minister's Question Time. William immediately fired the perfidious peer from his party post; but the other blue bloods sided with Cranborne, and a full-scale class war broke out in the Tory Party. I happened to be visiting the Commons that day and felt the Cromwellian frisson in the air. On the one side, William's conservative Commons; on the other, Cranborne's Tory Lords. And, for the first time in my life, I identified with the Roundheads.



ON THE GRAYEST AND COLDEST day of my visit, London unveiled the first public statue of Oscar Wilde, by the sculptor Maggi Hambling. It's wonderfully *roué*. Oscar is reclining on a long, horizontal plinth that invites you almost to sit on him, and he's carelessly brandishing a lengthy cigarette. His face is a pre-weathered mess of copper globules so that he looks like a dilapidated version of the acne-ridden JFK bust at the Kennedy Center. An entire brigade of the West End's acting elite turned out to celebrate, quipping, posing, and nattering despite the biting damp. *The Times* noticed darkly that the unveiling was attended by several "self-confessed" homosexuals, but its letter pages soon after revealed an even more British comment. Referring dryly to the "interesting" statue, Dr. A. Brearley of Stockport in Cheshire recalled that, in "March 1882, Rudyard Kipling's sister, Trix, met Oscar at a supper, and then wrote to Rudyard: 'To look at, he is like a bad copy of a bust of a Roman emperor roughly modeled in suet pudding.' Maggi Hambling seems to have got him right."

PERHAPS TO GET that last joke you need to know what a suet pudding is. For some reason, this dish is unknown anywhere else in the world, so a little explanation is in order. Suet (pronounced "soo-wet") pudding is a British dessert made out of flour and small, dried ringlets of animal fat. It comes in many guises—from treacle suet pudding to steak and kidney suet pudding—but my favorite (no chortles at the back please) is one called, I kid you not, "spotted dick." It's made by mixing flour, sugar, suet, and raisins in a plaster bowl, which is then wrapped in linen, steamed for several hours until pleasantly soggy, and served with that yellow, sweet, sticky liquid the English call custard. You won't believe me, but, on a cold December day in my hometown of East Grinstead, there are few things more pleasurable. In London now, one is urged to go to any number of fashionable, New York-style eateries, where the food, one is reliably told, is currently superior to anything being served in Paris. But I tend to agree with George Orwell, whose essay "In Defence of English Cooking" is the definitive text on such matters, that the best cuisine in these islands is usually to be found nowhere else and is reliably discovered burbling on top of a damp stove in the Home Counties. Orwell was also fond of the aforementioned dessert. In his essay, he lamented that "south of, say, Brussels, I do not imagine that you would succeed in getting hold of a suet pudding. In French there is not even a word that exactly translates 'suet.'" Of course, being English, it never occurred to him to wonder why.

ANDREW SULLIVAN

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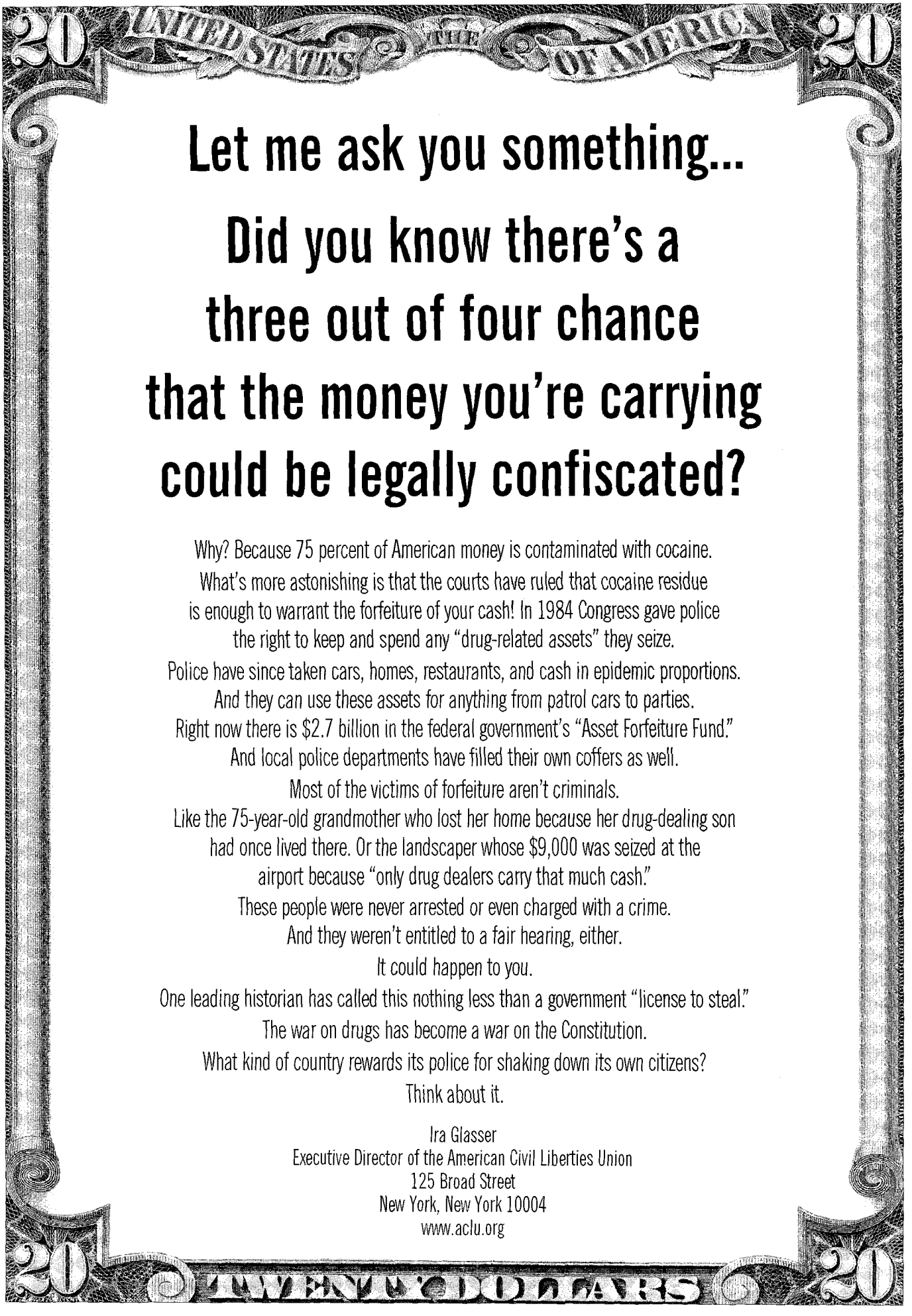

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